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富士見ファンタジア文庫

Slayers Special Volume 23

Break of Destiny!

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Oldies' Pride [Part 1]

I had made it a personal custom to drop by the local Sorcerers' Guild whenever I arrived in a new town to offer my greetings. While one could pick up general rumors at a local tavern, discoveries and research regarding the magical arts could only be found at the Guild.

And so, in this town as well, I visited the office to pay my respects to the Council Chairman. That was where I met this man.

"I am the Chairman of the Council, Milton Sunlook. I have heard much of your reputation, Miss Lina."

The old man stood up shakily from his seat with a beaming smile and reached out to shake my hand. Calling him "old man" might have been a bit rude, considering he was the Chairman of the Council for the Sorcerers' Guild here in Montere City.

I wondered just how old he was. He looked easily seventy or eighty. I didn't know what he looked like in his prime, but now he was completely withered and shrunken, a full head shorter than me. With his white hair and white mustache, his cheerful appearance made the title "Chairman" feel a bit stiff; "Gramps" seemed to fit him much better.

"Oh, stop, you're flattering me," I said, offering a polite, humble smile.

Then, Gramps—or rather, the Chairman—lowered his voice to a whisper.

"The truth is... I have something I'd like to ask of you..."

Here it comes, I thought.

He praised his target to get them in a good mood before springing a request on them. It was a classic negotiation tactic. If I let my guard down here, I'd end up being pushed into a job that didn't pay.

"If it's something small, I don't mind," I said, maintaining my smile without showing a hint of suspicion.

The Chairman lowered his voice even further. "I was wondering if... you could teach this old man some offensive magic."

"What... eh?"

At that absurd request, I couldn't help but let out a cry of surprise.

We moved to a different location—a cafe terrace a short distance away from the Guild. I spoke while lifting a forkful of apple pie to my mouth.

"Even so... asking to be taught offensive magic all of a sudden is a bit extreme, don't you think?"

I was wearing my bandana, black cloak, and various jewel amulets. Across from me sat Chairman Milton: white hair, white eyebrows, white beard, holding a staff and wearing a black cloak. We were an incredibly conspicuous pair for a cafe terrace, but there was no helping it. Given the nature of the conversation, it wasn't something we could discuss inside or near the Sorcerers' Guild.

"Well... that may be true, but..."

At my remark, Milton Bee—rather, the Chairman—shrank back, averting his eyes as he sipped his fragrant tea.

"Besides, for starters, isn't it against the rules of the Sorcerers' Guild to teach offensive spells to others? I'm sure you know that, Chairman."

Offensive spells were, in many ways, unsuitable for common knowledge. The reason the Guild forbade teaching them to others was quite simple: they were too easy to abuse.

Originally, if a sorcerer wanted to master an offensive spell, they were expected to research it and develop the spell themselves. Even within the broad category of "sorcerer," there were many types. There were those like me who wielded offensive spells, and there were researchers whose repertoire was limited to simple utility spells like *Lighting* for reading books in the dark.

The Chairman likely belonged to the latter group. Teaching a simple offensive spell to someone who already had a foundation in magic wouldn't be particularly difficult. In fact, simple offensive spells like *Flare Arrow* could be used even by someone who had never touched magic, provided they memorized the incantation.

However, if offensive spells were to spread through the general public with that kind of momentum, one could only imagine the chaos. Bandits or burglars would shout, "Hand over the money or you get a *Fireball*!" and panicked victims might retaliate with a *Dynast Brass*. If you chased a literal panty thief, a *Flare Arrow* might come flying your way. A neighborly dispute could escalate into an exchange of *Damu Brass*.

To prevent such situations from arising, the Guild had established these regulations. For the Chairman—the man responsible for the Guild—to break them was... well, no matter how I looked at it, it wasn't something to be praised.

Besides, offensive spells weren't exactly something an old man of his age should be picking up.

"If you want to defeat some kind of monster, it would be much faster to just hire someone suited for that kind of thing."

The Chairman was surely well aware of that. Despite that, the fact that he was blabbering about being taught offensive magic suggested there was a complicated reason behind it.

As I prompted him to explain, Chairman Milton composed himself.

"That man... that man, Kayle, I can’t believe he did that to my grandson... to Michael...!"

His expression was stained with rage, and the hand holding his cup trembled.

"......Sounds like there's a story here. Why don't you tell me about it first?"

"Oh. Well, I suppose it's best policy among sorcerers to have various exchanges regarding research and such. But there are more than a few stubborn types among us. If we just had a normal dinner party, a swampy argument would likely break out over the slightest thing."

"Wait, what!?"

I blurted out as a line that didn't fit him at all suddenly escaped his lips.

I had thought that kind of dialogue only suited people in their early thirties at the oldest.

While I placed an additional order for chocolate mousse cake, Gramps fell silent as if deep in thought.

"To avoid that, we've been holding a recreational event involving both families. The Sorcerers' Guild here in Montere and the one in the neighboring town, Louise, hold a friendship gathering once a year."

"A friendship gathering?"

It actually sounded like a rather interesting project. If they won or lost based on physical strength, it wouldn't affect their professional pride as researchers, and with families present, childish ego-clashing would be less likely to occur. Plus, it was a good opportunity for shut-in sorcerers who did nothing but study to move their bodies.

"But... even so... there’s someone you want me to defeat…?"
"The... the man you have to defeat is..."

I asked the question as the Chairman—I'd just call him Gramps—held up two fingers on his right hand and tilted his teacup.

"Well... at this year's gathering, a tragedy occurred..."

Gramps seemed to be getting excited; his eyes turned bloodshot as he began to speak.

"I shall never forget it. In event number nineteen, the Children's Sprint Race, my grandson Michael tripped and fell right before the finish line because a brat running beside him hooked his foot!"

"[.....]"

I let out a small sound as the conversation started heading in a suspicious direction.

"If he had stayed like that, he would have been in second place! Second! But he fell, scraped his knees, and got teary-eyed... a total disaster! His rank dropped all the way to last place! Naturally, I let my righteous indignation explode and took it up with the executive committee! I told them my grandson worked hard, so make him first place!"

Ugh, that's way out of line, Gramps... I mean, Mr. Chairman. Well, they did say people tended to dote on their grandchildren...

"However! My proposal was rejected! And what's more, that man—the grandfather of the brat who tripped Michael, that Kayle fellow from Louise—had the gall to make the ridiculous claim that it was my Michael who stuck his foot out first! Utterly immature!"

"Um, excuse me."

"No matter how much I tried to reason with him, he wouldn't listen! For those who won't understand through words, I must show them through power! He insulted Michael! He laughed at his teary eyes!"

"So that's the reason..."

"What do you mean, 'that's the reason'!?"

As I slumped my shoulders and muttered, Gramps stood up in a fury.

"You're still young, so you might not realize it, but no human lives forever! Everyone grows old and dies eventually! Especially for someone like me with little time left! That is why! People try to

pass something on to their children and grandchildren! That is what it means to connect the generations!"

"Right, right."

He was spouting all these plausible-sounding sentiments, but the long and short of it was that he was just a doting grandfather.

Naturally, I intended to refuse this request, but my additional cake hadn't arrived yet. Since there was a prior agreement that Gramps would foot the bill, it wouldn't be too late to refuse after I'd finished eating.

Ignoring my lack of enthusiasm, Gramps continued his tirade.

"It is the duty of our predecessors to protect our descendants! Anything done for the sake of a grandchild is justice! Viva Grandchild! Sieg Grandchild! Heil Grandchild!"

"Wait a minute! 'Anything' is going a bit too far! That's bad!"

I finally had to call a timeout at his rising intensity.

"That doesn't sound like justice at all!"

"Hmph! I'm well aware of that without you telling me! Besides, even when I say 'showdown,' it's not like we're going to have a duel to the death! The venue is the plaza between here and Louise. The executive committee will choose three events, and the winner will be decided by the best of three. Interference or violence is an automatic disqualification. That's the nature of the match. But..."

Gramps let out a crafty, cunning smile.

"I found a loophole! According to the rules, using offensive magic is not forbidden! Both I and Kayle are the researcher types. Neither of us could use offensive magic to begin with, so I suppose they didn't think to restrict it... but if that's the case, there's no reason not to take advantage of it! To give that peasant who insulted my grandson's honor a taste of iron-rust defeat, I will choose any means necessary! Now is the time for us to fight!"

Gramps began shouting as his excitement peaked again. The waitress who brought the extra cake flinched and pulled back in fear.

Finally coming back to his senses, Gramps cleared his throat. He waited for the waitress to hurry away before finally lowering his voice.

Gramps finally calmed down, though he still looked a bit frayed.

".....Regardless... of course, I have no intention of actually harming my opponent," he said.

".....Re-really?"

Looking at his current state, it didn't exactly seem that way to me...

"Naturally. I am the Chairman of the Sorcerers' Guild, after all. My goal is to make him admit his defeat, acknowledge his error, and bow down before my grandson. If I were to actually do something to him, it would lose all meaning. Besides, I have no desire to make my grandson the descendant of a criminal."

"I see."

I felt somewhat convinced.

"The offensive magic will strictly be used as a feint. In other words, something just to scare him a little will suffice."

"Okay."

"This request bends the principles of the Guild. The fee will be ten gold coins in advance. And as a deferred payment... I will allow you to read the most secret of secret volumes among the grimoires I possess. How does that sound?"

"A secret volume?"

What kind of book would the Chairman of a Sorcerers' Guild call a "secret volume among secrets"?

I mean, this was a small Guild in a town that wasn't exactly a metropolis. I couldn't have massive expectations, but still, there was always the "what if."

Gramps flashed a smile like a child who had just set a trap and lowered his voice. ".....To those of us with a researcher's temperament, it's little more than a book of legends. But to a type like you, who travels the world using offensive magic, it might be a book of great interest...?"

"The *Apocalypse of the Beast*. It is a grimoire that records the King of the Wolves, the great demon known in legend as the Greater Beast."

"WHAAAAAAAT!?"

At the sudden mention of that name, I screamed without thinking.

The "Beastmaster" Gramps had just mentioned was one of the five legendary high-ranking generals who served directly under the Demon King. Whether the Demon King and his subordinates actually existed was one thing, but it was certain that there was a source of immense power referred to as the Greater Beast.

"......Right. Well then, it's finally time to teach you that offensive magic. If I can decipher it, I might be able to research offensive spells that draw on that power. Even if the book isn't that advanced, it won't hurt to have a look."

I'd teach him a spell to scare his opponent in exchange for ten gold coins and a look at a legendary grimoire. Gramps didn't seem to have any intent to kill his opponent, and...

".....Alright. I'll teach you a suitable spell. But the commission fee is due regardless of how your match turns out."

"Of course, that is perfectly fine."

Gramps and I shared a grin and firmly shook hands over the table.

There was a small patch of wasteland just outside the town of Montere. It was a spot I had spotted along the highway on my way into town; there were no houses or fields nearby, making it the perfect place to fire off spells to my heart's content.

After leaving the cafe terrace, Milton and I made our way there. I scanned the left and right sides of the road to make sure no one was around before I spoke. This wasn't something we could practice openly, but here, we didn't have to worry much about prying eyes.

"So, when you say 'offensive magic,' there are all kinds. Depending on how you plan to surprise him, the approach changes. What exactly are you thinking?"

Gramps tilted his head for a moment at my question.

"Let's see. I won't know what kind of events we'll be doing until the day of... but since the goal is to startle him, I suppose something flashy with a loud noise would be best."

"I see. In that case..."

I chanted the spell under my breath and aimed toward the wasteland.

"FIREBALL!"

A ball of light exploded.

"Gah!"

"See? Surprising, right?"

I turned around to find that Gramps wasn't right behind me; instead, he was collapsed on the ground about a dozen paces away.

"Waaaaah! Gramps!?"

I rushed over in a panic and pulled him up, patting his cheeks until he finally started to twitch and move.

"......Don't... let... go... yet... I haven't... gone... over... there... yet...! Ha!"

He was muttering some very ominous-sounding delirium, possibly seeing his sister back in his hometown, but he managed to snap himself upright.

"As if that could happen!"

He blinked a few times, finally coming back to his senses, and glared at me.

"I saw a distant light for a second there!"

"Ah. Well, that spell is pretty bright the moment the light sphere explodes, so if you look directly at it..."

"That wasn't the kind of light I saw!"

"......Hm....."

"But look, it fits your criteria perfectly. If you're a sorcerer, you can use it just by memorizing the incantation. It makes a flashy light and sound, and the power is just 'a little surprising'."

"How is that just 'surprising'!? If I hit someone with a spell like that, they'd be charred to the bone!"

As Gramps raised his voice in exaggerated protest, I waved my hands dismissively.

"What are you talking about? I have an acquaintance who, if hit with this, would just complain with teary eyes that her bangs got singed. And if the opponent happened to be a high-ranking demon, they'd just say it was 'lukewarm' and that'd be the end of it."

"......I see. Is it the age gap?"

"No, that's not it. Or rather, I feel like you have some serious issues with the people you associate with."

Granted, I couldn't entirely deny that part, but...

"But look, you don't actually have to hit them directly..."

"I feel like the shockwave alone would be a disaster! I just got blown away myself!"

I put my hand to my chin and thought about it.

"Hmm..... I see... I guess you're right. Now that I think about it, it's just for intimidation, so maybe it's better to use an arrangement of a normal spell."

"Arrangement...?"

"Yeah. Even a common spell can be used in different ways depending on how you do it. For example, you can take the *Lighting* spell you use for reading and shorten the duration while cranking up the brightness. That alone makes it a spell to temporarily blind your opponent."

"I see, I see."

Gramps nodded along intently.

"Or you could use *Aqua Create* to soak them, making their clothes stick and slowing them down, while also making their footing slippery."

"I see, I see."

"Or maybe something like *Bephiss Bring* to trip them up."

".....*Bephiss Bring*... wasn't that the spell for digging tunnels? But even if you dig a hole in the ground, they won't necessarily fall in. If they see the hole, anyone would just walk around it."

"Ah. Well, a pitfall is a pitfall, but if you do it right, they'll fall for it quite often. You create the tunnel just a little bit below the surface, right under their feet. In other words, an invisible pitfall."

"An invisible pitfall?"

Gramps frowned, seemingly having trouble visualizing it.

"Ah. Basically, like this."

I chanted the spell under my breath and slammed my hand against the ground.

"BEPHISS BRING!"

In that instant, starting from where my hand touched the ground, a tunnel of earth vanished just beneath the surface, stretching right to where Gramps was standing. Naturally, the ground under his feet became thin and brittle.

"Whoa—!"

The ground collapsed easily, and Gramps fell into the tunnel with a *gyu-kype* sound.

.....That was a strange noise.

At the same time, Gramps groaned and crouched down at the bottom of the hole!

"Are you okay!?" I rushed to the edge of the hole.

"Am I!? Ow-ow-ow-ow-ow!" Gramps huddled at the bottom, clutching his right ankle. "I am NOT okay! Ow! I've twisted my ankle! What on earth were you thinking!?"

"No, well, I just thought a clear practical example would be best..."

"You didn't have to drop ME in! There were plenty of other ways... ow-ow-ow! What are you going to do!? If I can't make it to the match the day after tomorrow because of this!"

"The day after tomorrow!?"

I helped Gramps up and pulled him out of the hole, knitting my brows. A minor ankle sprain would usually heal in a day or two, but that was based on people our age. They say older people heal more slowly...

"I know! I can use a *Recovery* spell—"

"—No, don't."

Gramps shook his head firmly at my suggestion.

"You're not serious!?"

"I didn't mention it earlier, but... that spell uses the target's own physical strength to heal the wound, doesn't it? It might be fine for young people like you... but for an old man like me, one use of that and I'm exhausted for a while. In fact, about six months ago when I had a hairline fracture in my leg, I used magic to heal it... and I couldn't move for two or three days."

".....Is... is that how it works?"

It was true that healing a significant injury with magic could be quite draining, but... to think the fatigue would linger like that...

"That's how it is. I don't know how much stamina it would take to fix a sprained ankle... but it won't do me any good if my leg is healed but I'm too exhausted to move. Can't you use *Resurrection*? I think I'd be okay with that one..."

Resurrection—the highest level of white magic. While it didn't actually have the power to bring back the dead, it could heal even those on the brink of death without consuming the patient's stamina, which is where it got its name.

"I... can't use that one."

Naturally, it was difficult to master, and the number of people who could use it was very small. Including me.

"So fast!"

Hearing my answer, Gramps let out a deep, deep sigh and slumped his shoulders.

"......Ah..... so it’s no use after all..... Now my grandson... my grandson's honor... I hate that Kayle... and various other things..."

When he started muttering gloomily like that, it was really depressing! Besides, if he got grumpy now, he might decide not to show me the grimoire after all.

"A-Anyway, I'll think of something!" I followed up quickly.

"Something...? Is there a way?" Gramps shot me a cold look over his shoulder with one eye.

"Um..... er..... well....."

If I said "I'll think of it later," he might call the whole thing off right then and there.

"Don't tell me you... are one of Kayle's spies! How dare you! Do you hate my grandson that much!?"

"Why does it have to be that!?"

Cornered, a thought suddenly flashed through my mind as I racked my brain! I stared back into Gramps's eyes.

"Wait—there is one way. It’s a do-or-die last resort, though!"

I declared it with absolute determination.

Montere and Louise.

These two towns had developed somewhat in parallel, and almost exactly at the halfway point between them was a place that resembled a small plaza. A river flowed nearby along the base of the mountains, with a pebbly shore. Depending on the season, it would have been perfect for a picnic.

In a corner of that plaza stood a group in black robes.

"Hey everyone, sorry to keep you waiting."

As Milton called out, the group turned their eyes toward us in unison. In that dark world, I broke into a cold sweat.

Everyone's faces twitched at the same time.

Thanks to my help, Gramps had a chest like a pigeon and the proportions of a supermodel! I even gave him a script: if anyone commented on how he'd "grown," he was to say he was just wearing high-heeled boots.

I couldn't see perfectly, but there were about five or six sorcerers in black robes and cloaks—likely the executive committee for this "friendship gathering." Despite the absurdity of the event, more people had shown up than I expected.

The look they gave us was one of "we have a lot to say," yet it was tinged with a sort of pitying sorrow.

I'm sorry. I realized it was a stretch. But Gramps didn't stop me, and I thought maybe... just maybe... we could pull it off...

No, it's a total failure! They definitely know!

I expected them to curse us and tell us to stop messing around, but instead—

"They're already here. Over there."

One of them gestured behind them. I turned toward the indicated direction and—

Pfft!

I nearly sprayed spit everywhere.

A bizarre object was standing there.

For some reason, the committee members stared at us for a long moment before—all at once—they snapped their heads away, refusing to look.

Ultimately, I desperately suppressed the urge to clutch my head and scream. Gramps's leg hadn't healed by today. So, we were forced to resort to the last-ditch effort I had planned: the "Double-Stacked Robe" technique I'd seen traveling performers use back in my hometown!

Namely: I carried Gramps on my back, tied him on so he wouldn't fall, and then he wore an extra-long robe to cover me up. It was an "Enhanced Version," unlike the original street performer gag, because I had cut holes in the robe so I could actually see where I was going!

"......Well, shall we begin?"

"Y-Yeah..."

The committee members diverted their eyes as if escaping reality. What was with this attitude?

"So, where is that Kayle fellow?" Gramps asked.

One of the committee members answered without even trying to make eye contact.

"The contents of the match... should we reconsider them?"

Gramps's face was indeed that of a white-haired old man, but the black robe and cloak rose up a full head's height behind him, and a pair of boots peeked out from the hem of the long robe. Yes. It looked exactly as if Gramps was strapped to the chest of a tall person, with the robe and cloak hiding whoever was behind him.

I mean, it doesn't just 'look like' that... that's exactly what's happening...

I couldn't see well, but I assumed whoever was supporting the other side had cut eye-holes in their robe too.

The black mass on the other side shifted, making a gesture as if pointing at us.

"Hey! I just heard a 'pfft' coming from over there!"

"Why do YOU have a woman's voice!?" I blurted out in response.

Both sides froze for a moment, then simultaneously spun around to look at the committee. The committee members, who had been staring at us intensely, all looked away at the same time.

".....This is ventriloquism," I claimed weakly.

"Wh... What a coincidence! This is ventriloquism too! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

The other side and I made our pathetic excuses. And of course, by this point, both I and my opponent had realized the other’s true identity.

The White Serpent Naga.

Self-proclaimed rival of mine, and officially a "woman at a dead end in life." Currently, she was hidden by the cloak and robe, but her usual outfit consisted of long black hair, spiked shoulder guards, an pointlessly high amount of exposed skin, and a skull necklace.

Looking at her now, the bulges at the shoulders definitely seemed to have spikes underneath, and I recognized the boots peeking out from under the robe.

"That's my line. Everything is for my grandson."

I suppose a lot had happened on her end too—not that I wanted to know the details—and it had resulted in this.

The two Gramps were sparking off each other, but for one of the opponents—Gramps Kayle—to show up in this state made it clear why the committee members hadn't said anything.

"Fine, fine. Let's just get through the match quickly."

One of the committee members—a female sorcerer wearing a monocle—spoke in a tone of voice that suggested she had zero motivation left. Well, I could understand the feeling.

They had probably reached a consensus to just move forward without acknowledging the obvious.

At any rate.

Milton Gramps and "Piggyback" Kayle... or rather, Naga and I, headed toward the match site as prompted.

"Ho-ho-ho. You certainly have some nerve showing up, Kayle."

Above my head, Milton spoke. Of course, I couldn't see his face in this position, but his voice was dripping with hostility.

"Hah-hah-hah! You’re the one who’s got guts showing your face here, Milton. I’ll have you know, I’m not the same man I was before."

Kayle shot back, refusing to back down.

Yeah, yeah. You're definitely 'not the same.' We can see that.

"Hmph. Bark all you want, but my grandson's justice will not waver. I'll give you a real eyeful today."

"That's my line. I'll show you."

The duel between the two pairs—which had become quite the strange spectacle—was about to begin! What trials awaited them? And in whose hands would victory lie?!

(Oldies' Pride: To be continued!)

Oldies' Pride [Part 2]

Synopsis:

The conflict between Milton, a sorcerer from Montere, and Kayle, a sorcerer from Louise, had intensified over a dispute involving their respective grandsons. Lina, asked to coach Milton, accidentally caused him to sprain his ankle right before the match! Thinking quickly, Lina carried Milton on her back and covered them both in a robe, appearing as a very tall old man to join the competition. However, what awaited them was the bizarre sight of Kayle strapped to the front of a robe-covered Naga! How would this match end?!

The mountains were green. The surface of the river reflected the soft sunlight, sparkling as it flowed. The wind was neither too hot nor too cold—perfect weather for exercise.

On the riverbank, a sunshade tent with "Tournament Headquarters" written on the roof had been pitched. Underneath, four or five people in sorcerer robes sat on chairs made of wooden crates. They likely used these supplies for the annual gathering.

Near the headquarters was a small platform, and the "Gramps"—rather, Naga and I with the Gramps strapped to us—stood side-by-side in front of it. Eventually, the female sorcerer with the monocle appeared on the platform.

There was no fanfare.

"Fine, fine. We will now begin the '1st Annual Cold Water Cup: Which Grandson is Wrong? Tournament'."

She declared the start of the tournament in a thin, bored voice.

.....Man, this woman has zero energy.

Well, asking for enthusiasm in this situation was probably asking too much. At her declaration, the sorcerers at the headquarters gave a limp round of applause.

"And so, without further ado, the first event—"

She pointed toward the mountains and spoke in a flat tone.

"In the mountains far to the north, there is said to be an evil dragon troubling the people. Therefore, the first one to defeat it wins. Go. Start."

".....WHAT KIND OF NONSENSE IS THAT!?"

The screams of Milton and Kayle echoed through the valley.

"Dragon slaying!? That's completely insane!" Milton protested. Since I was carrying him, I couldn't see his face, but he was fuming.

"In the first place, I've never heard of a dragon in the northern mountains!" Kayle shouted, veins popping on his forehead as I peered through the eye-holes in the robe. I imagined Milton looked much the same.

The female sorcerer picked at her ear with her pinky. "Hmm. You have a complaint?"

"OF COURSE WE DO!"

Without even looking at the synchronized Gramps, she continued.

"Then please, announce your withdrawal and move on to the second round. The first one to withdraw loses the first round."

"[.....]"

They were stunned into silence by her arrogant dismissal. I see. I understood the committee's plan. They were throwing impossible tasks at them to make them realize how meaningless this fight was.

But.

"......She says. Look at that. Just give up quietly, Kayle."

Milton’s voice came from above my head.

"Hah? What was that, Milton? Are you suggesting I withdraw just because you’re scared?"

Kayle, strapped to the front of the "Giant Naga," replied in a mocking tone.

"Did you think my love for my grandson was that weak? If you're so scared, you should be the one to crawl away and withdraw."

".....What did you say!?"

Milton’s voice was tinged with rage.

"I gave you advice out of the kindness of my heart so you wouldn't drop dead! Fine! Since you’ve said that much, I’ll make you realize exactly how much I love my grandson!"

"Ho-ho-ho! You’re certainly good with your mouth, but let's see how much you can actually do!"

The two Gramps were practically shooting sparks at each other from their eyes—though I couldn't see it clearly from my position.

See? I knew it! The committee’s plan was too optimistic! As long as they were doing it for their grandsons, there was no way to stop these two!

The female sorcerer looked like she might panic at the failed plan—or so I thought.

"Ah. Then please, get going. If you keep heading north, you'll eventually hit Dragon’s Peak or the Kataart Mountains. I'm sure you'll run into at least one dragon."

She spoke with utter shamelessness while fussing over her split ends.

I see. If they realized their mistake due to the impossible task, good. If they didn't, they weren't allowed to come back until they did.

Under the robe, Milton tapped my shoulder lightly with his toe.

"......I'm counting on you....."

Personally, I had zero interest in running through the mountains with an old man on my back until we found a dragon. But even if I said that, Gramps wouldn't listen.

I kept a plan of my own hidden in my heart and prepared to act—but someone else was a split second faster.

"OH-HO-HO-HO-HO!"

Naga, the main body on the other side, let out a burst of idiotic laughter.

Surely you don't think a "task" like that is going to stop us!! For someone like Naga the Serp... I mean, someone like Kayle... Kayle Bau...?

Naga faltered, having forgotten the full name, so the strapped-on Gramps Kayle lowered his voice and whispered:

"...It's Kayle Weiss."

Right, right! For someone like Kayle Weiss, this is child's play!

As soon as she said it, she dashed toward the mountain in the north!

It seemed her thinking was exactly the same as mine. She intended to blast off at high speed to terrify her Gramps into reflection.

Alright, then I’m going too!

I chanted a spell under my breath.

"RAY WING!"

With the release of the "Words of Power," Gramps and I were propelled forward as if shot from a cannon.

It was a High-Speed Flight spell. A barrier of wind enveloped the caster, allowing them to fly—the total sum of speed, altitude, and carry-able weight was proportional to the caster's ability.

Compared to flying solo, adding Gramps's weight meant sacrificing some speed and altitude, but it was still far faster than running!

The only drawback was that since I was looking through the holes in the robe, I couldn't see anything directly in front of me.

"Gramps! I can't see what's ahead, so give me directions!"

"Leave it to me! Ho, ho, ho! Just keep going straight! We're about to overtake Kayle! Go for it!"

Instead of being scared, he was actually getting into it.

That's... great, I guess. Gramps.

"We're... we're almost at the mountain!"

Just as I thought. Tension crept into Gramps's voice as he made the call.

"—Right! Go right!"

Following his lead, I veered slightly to the right—

THUD!

I immediately hit something and was sent flying!

The impact broke the spell, and we went tumbling down a slope. Well, since the wind barrier had been surrounding us, we didn't take much damage, but—

"Hey! What do you think you're doing!? I told you there was a tree on the right!"

"You did not! Don't give me such confusing directions! If you shout 'Right! Right!' repeatedly, a normal person is going to turn right!"

I found myself shouting back in protest.

"What are you saying!? Back when she was alive, my wife understood me with just an 'Oi' or a 'That'!"

"Don't give me that unreasonable bragging! If you want to turn right, say 'Turn right!' Got it!? Whether it's a wife or whatever! Or do you want to keep being selfish and lose!?"

".....Hmph..... I understand....."

Hmph. You should have just been honest from the start.

"By the way, where are Kayle and the others?"

I asked, figuring Naga and the others should have made a move by now. If they had, Milton should have said something. The fact that there was no sign of them meant...

Gramps spoke with a voice brimming with a sense of victory.

"We overtook them ages ago! They're far behind! I can't even see them anymore! Now, left!"

I changed course to the left, dispelled the magic at a suitable spot, and landed.

That's strange.

I signaled Milton to be silent. I peeked through the robe's peephole to check the surroundings, but the trees covering the mountain blocked any long-range view.

All I could say for sure was that there was no sign of Naga and Kayle. No sign of movement either.

I had assumed Naga was thinking the same thing as me—to use speed to scare her Gramps into calling off the match. But Naga could also use High-Speed Flight. If she had seen me overtake her, she would have done the same thing.

Which meant—Naga had another goal? But what?

Wait! I've got it! I see Naga's plan!

"I have a plan! Just stay quiet for a second!" I whispered to Milton.

"A plan?"

"Just do it!"

"Uh... um....."

We hid among the trees and waited in silence. Eventually, a voice that sounded like Naga's echoed faintly—

.....*CRACK... SNAP... CRUNCH-CRUNCH-CRUNCH!*

Trees groaned and snapped as a giant black form appeared on the edge of the mountain!

The Demon King Dragon! Deimos Dragon!

Normally, they inhabit the Kataart Mountains where demons dwell, and in terms of combat power, they are said to be the strongest of the dragon race. They are the "Black Dragons" of legend.

Naga could use a spell to summon one of these things.

Yes, that was Naga's plan. She waited for us to leave and then summoned this dragon. By defeating it, she'd get the points! She must have thought we had disappeared into a blind spot on the other side of the mountain before putting her plan into action.

It wasn't a bad plan, but now that I knew, I was going to use it!

I had already finished chanting my spell. All that was left was to release the "Words of Power" at the giant dragon!

"DRAGON SLAVE!"

The strongest offensive spell a human can use! True to its name, that one strike could bury even a giant dragon!

The red light of magical energy converged toward the Deimos Dragon—but at that moment!

The Deimos Dragon turned and exhaled darkness with a roar!

VOID BREATH!

Red light and darkness collided and swirled—*KABOOM!*

Light and sound erupted, and the blast leveled the trees as it swept across the mountain slope!

When everything settled—a giant body, leaking a groan of resentment, revealed itself on the scorched mountainside.

Did it... did it block the Dragon Slave!?

It seemed that the moment I launched the attack, it instinctively fired its Void Breath, absorbing or neutralizing the spell's destructive power. I guess the label of "strongest combat power of the dragon race" wasn't just for show.

But—

"Yah!"

Even the strongest dragon couldn't escape unscathed from that blow. Its black wing membranes were torn in places, and its dark scales were damaged.

Then one more for the finishing blow!

I began to chant the same spell again—but before I could finish!

Along with the voice of a ragged-sounding Gramps Kayle, a black shadow soared into the air! Charging toward the strongest dragon in a violent spin was none other than Naga + Kayle!

And then, the bizarre eight-headed figure slammed a kick into the Deimos Dragon's head!

The giant body tilted with a scream. The Black Dragon collapsed with a thud that shook the earth, turned into darkness, and vanished into the void.

All that remained was the ravaged mountain surface and Naga, standing tall with Gramps Kayle strapped to her.

.....Of course, she didn't defeat a Deimos Dragon with a kick. Naga had ordered the dragon she summoned to pretend to be defeated by her kick.

Naga turned toward us and laughed.

Ho-ho-ho-ho! I know you're there! I'll praise you for reading my plan, but it looks like your aim was a bit off! One point for us! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!

Naga's voice was triumphant.

So annoying!

But of course, I couldn't complain. We lost the first round.

When we returned after the first event, the female sorcerer with the monocle was waiting for us on the platform next to the headquarters. Veins were popping on her forehead, which was understandable. Being forced to put up with the Gramps' selfishness while trying to make them change their minds, only for her impossible tasks to be cleared so easily...

A chuckle escaped the sorcerer's lips.

"Fuhahaha! What foolish humans you are! To think you actually defeated the Magic Dragon!"

She threw back her cloak and declared it grandly. The sorcerers under the tent broke into pointless applause.

Everyone has completely given up and gone off the deep end.

She had even slipped into a "villain" character. At this point, the only ones taking this seriously were the two Gramps and Naga.

"But do not get cocky!" the sorcerer barked. "Know that from here, you enter true hell! Second round! The Grandchild Search!"

"—Wha...!"

Both Gramps shouted in surprise at the declaration.

"What is the meaning of this!?"

To Milton's question, the sorcerer fluttered her cloak again.

"Prior to this match, I took the liberty of inviting both of your grandsons here in secret! Originally, if you two had realized the futility of this conflict, I had a heartwarming script prepared where the grandsons would appear and say, 'Grandpa, it's best to get along after all ♪'... but now, I shall choose any means necessary! The children are hidden nearby! The first to find them wins!"

"But... remember this! If they are not found by sunset, they shall never return!"

The committee members applauded.

"Kuh...! Curse you, Demon King!" Gramps Kayle groaned.

Good grief. She's being treated as a Demon King now.

Well, she did have that vibe...

"Wait for me, Michael! I will definitely find you!" Milton barked, as the committee clapped.

"No! I'll be the one to find Lacock first!" Gramps Kayle shouted back, names I assumed belonged to the grandsons.

The three people in the headquarters seats clapped pointlessly again... wait.

".....Hey. Isn't the number of sorcerers in the committee seats decreasing?"

Dammit! I'd stopped caring and spoke in my normal voice, giving the enemy a hint!

Well, the committee members seemed to have abandoned any attempt at calling us out, so they didn't say anything.

"Hm?" Milton groaned at my observation.

I felt like there were four or five of them when the tournament was announced. Of course, the possibility that they got bored and went home couldn't be ruled out...

"Uh..... indeed, about two of them seem to be gone! Which means...!"

“Hmph! That means those guys kidnapped the grandsons and ran off!”

The voice that cut across Milton's was Naga's.

"They must have taken them while we were away during the first round!" Milton said.

"Then they haven't gone far!" Naga declared.

We scanned the area. If they had taken the children while we were busy at the mountain, they would have definitely headed in the opposite direction. The area was like an open square, with a river flowing along the base of the mountain and a road stretching out. The visibility was good, and there were no people in sight.

On the other side of the mountain were fields and a forest.

Then there was only one answer!

"RAY WING!"

I used the High-Speed Flight spell again and blasted toward the forest!

"There's a chance of an ambush as soon as we enter the forest! Give me a signal right before we go in!"

"Understood! But hurry! Kayle is right behind us with the same spell!"

"Got it!"

I pushed my speed to the limit. Before long—Milton's voice suddenly rang out. I veered to the right without even thinking.

"Whoa!"

"What happened!?"

"Ugh! They’re shooting! From inside the forest! Offensive spells!"

"But... you dodged that quite well..."

"It was all instinct and experience!"

So it really was an attack. Normally, a half-baked spell would have been repelled by the wind barrier I had deployed around us, but I couldn't see the enemy’s magic through the robe. That was why I had moved purely as a precaution.

In any case, I canceled the spell, landed, and scanned the area—at that exact moment, I caught a glimpse of an arrow of cold flying from the forest!

I leaped to the side instinctively, but I lost my balance and tumbled over!

Gah! I moved the way I usually do, but... my field of vision is too narrow, and carrying Gramps makes it impossible to keep my center of gravity! It's so hard to move in this thing!

I thrust out my hands, which I had kept hidden under the robe until now, to brace myself. I kicked off the ground and managed to scramble back up.

The ones who had attacked were two sorcerers in black cloaks and robes lurking in the bushes at the edge of the forest. They were likely the committee members who had taken the grandsons.

Since the opponents were the committee and the grandsons were likely nearby, I couldn't exactly blow the whole forest away with a *Dragon Slave*.

Instead, I dashed across the ground and charged in! From the other direction, the Naga team charged while still using their flight spell!

The sorcerers faltered at the simultaneous pincer attack from two directions. They hurriedly chanted their incantations, voices harmonizing as they released their spells.

"FREEZE ARROW!"

Both of them fired at Naga’s group. The arrows of cold they produced struck Naga and her partner head-on—only to be deflected by the wind barrier surrounding them, flying off harmlessly into the distance. The committee sorcerers were visibly rattled.

They might have known how to use offensive spells, but they clearly weren't used to actual combat. Well, I didn't think there were many sorcerers out there who knew a spell as specialized as *Ray Wing* to begin with. Regardless, if they were amateurs at fighting, they were no match for me!

I chanted my spell—

"FREEZE ARROW!"

I released the same spell they had used! The dozen or so arrows of cold I conjured slammed into the area around them.

"You missed them completely! Aim better!" Milton barked from above my head.

"No! That was exactly what I wanted!"

The sorcerers tried to turn and run from Naga and me, but—

"Wh... what is this!?"

They cried out, struggling, but they couldn't move. Naturally. The arrows of cold I had just fired had completely flash-frozen the vegetation around them. They were no longer surrounded by soft, pliable grass and branches, but by a cold, hard cage of ice.

With offensive magic, hitting the target isn't the only way to do it.

Naga's group canceled their flight spell and landed on the ground.

"FREEZE ARROW!"

K-ching!

Naga's arrow of cold struck the committee members directly, freezing them completely solid.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Your aim is still too soft!"

".....Are you an idiot!?" I snapped at the boasting Naga. "How are we supposed to ask them where they took the grandsons if they're frozen solid!?"

"Uh.....? Oops what now.....?"

The face of Gramps Kayle, strapped to Naga, twitched as she froze in realization.

".....Anyway, at this point, we just have to search the old-fashioned way!"

I said, stepping into the forest. Naga's team followed shortly after. We wandered back and forth through the thick woods, but we couldn't find a trace of the children.

".....They aren't here. Are they really in this forest...?"

Milton was muttering above me, sounding like he was either getting bored or starting to panic.

Well, it was possible those two sorcerers were just decoys meant to lead us the wrong way while the grandsons were somewhere else... but based on what I'd seen around the venue earlier, the forest was the only likely place.

Wait.

Where were the children at the very beginning, before the match started? Now that I thought about it, I hadn't seen anyone like them near the headquarters.

If the committee had planned to surprise the Gramps by bringing the children out once they reconciled, the kids must have been waiting somewhere not too far from that spot.

But the committee members had been so exhausted by the Gramps' bizarre appearance that they had changed the rules on a whim. And while we were messing around at the mountain with the Deimos Dragon, they must have taken them somewhere...

No. Wait! That's it! If that's the case...!

I spun on my heel and started running. Back toward the riverbank where the tournament headquarters was!

"W-what is it!? Where are you going!?" Milton asked from above.

"To the place where your grandson is!"

"What!? You found Michael!?"

"Probably!"

"But...! It's hard to believe they went back toward the mountain!"

"It's not the mountain!"

"I don't get it! Anyway, Kayle is sticking right to us!"

Gramps Kayle and Naga had seen me run off with such confidence that they had scrambled to follow. I doubted they had realized the truth yet, but they were definitely looking for a chance to overtake us. I wanted to shake them off, but there was no point in digging my own grave with petty tricks.

The tournament tent came into view. The female sorcerer was still standing tall on the platform.

"Fuhahaha! Have the children been found!? Or are you here to declare your surrender? If you quietly stop the match and reconcile, I might consider telling you where they are!"

"BURST RONDO!"

Ignoring the "Demon King's" provocation, I chanted a spell and released it toward the headquarters as I ran past her!

Pop-pop-pop-pop-bang!

It was a spell that caused multiple small explosions. It had almost no offensive power, but it was great for intimidation. The sorcerers sitting there leaped out of their seats.

"Hmph! I see!" Naga's voice came from behind. It seemed she had realized it too.

Since the match started, the sorcerers at the headquarters had been sitting idly on wooden crates, occasionally giving those meaningless rounds of applause. But they weren't meaningless.

Those wooden crates they were sitting on—they were sitting there to hide the sounds or presence of anyone hidden inside.

Yes. The children were in those crates!

We both dashed toward them. Our team and Naga's team reached the crates at almost exactly the same time. Forgetting they were even competing, the Gramps reached out to lift the lids—

I noticed something.

Wait—

But before I could say a word of warning, the Gramps had already yanked the lids open.

Inside the long, large crate, two little boys—maybe five years old—were huddled together. Their eyes were slightly watery, either from the fear of being locked in or the sudden brightness of the sun. The two boys rubbed their eyes and looked up.

The moment of liberation.

What the children saw were two eight-headed giant Gramps, one piggybacking and one being cradled, both wearing "gentle" smiles.

The two children spoke in perfect unison:

“Ugh. Gross.”

In that instant, before we even got to a third event, the Gramps' total defeat was finalized.

And so, the battle ended. If you think about it, to young, honest children, the sight of their grandfathers at that moment must have been incredibly bizarre. Their reaction might have been cruel, but it was also unavoidable.

Naturally, the "grandchild-loving" Gramps weren't going to recover from that psychological damage anytime soon. The match was canceled then and there.

I did receive my commission fee, and Milton showed me the promised grimoire. As it turned out, the spells structured in that book were useless; they required a magical capacity that no human could possibly possess.

Also, I found out later that Naga hadn't realized I was the one under the robe at all.

Finally, regarding Milton and Kayle...

Between the towns of Montere and Louise, there is a plaza facing the river. Those who pass by say they occasionally see two shadows silhouetted against the river at dusk.

"I wonder... where did we go wrong...?"

"Don't ask me..."

Sometimes, such conversations can still be heard. At any rate, from the following year, the friendship gathering between the two towns reportedly proceeded without any issues. I suppose that's a happy ending, in its own way.

(Oldies' Pride: End)

Break of Destiny [Part 1]

There were two sets of footsteps crunching through the thick layer of fallen leaves. They were clearly accustomed to mountain paths; even with heavy loads on their backs, the men’s breathing and walking rhythms remained steady.

At first glance, they looked like ordinary travelers. If you passed them on a mountain trail, it would be polite to offer a small nod.

...That is, if their luggage hadn't been human.

The hemp sacks carried by the larger man squirmed, and muffled groans escaped from within. They were definitely not the sounds of animals. They were likely children who had been gagged.

I didn't exactly want to get involved in trouble, but it wasn't in my nature to stay silent and watch something like this happen.

Good grief... honestly. What are they doing in the middle of these freezing mountains?

I let out an internal sigh.

"Looks heavy."

The men froze for a second at the voice suddenly coming from their side, then spun around as if they’d been spring-loaded.

How did they see me? I was wearing a thick robe for the cold, a black cloak, and shoulder guards, along with my jewel amulets. They could tell I was a sorcerer, but they had to decide if I was the real deal or just a traveling brat putting on an act.

"It's nothing much," the man without a sack said with a predatory grin. He signaled to the man carrying the bag to keep going. "We've got enough hands, so don't worry about it. Just go home, eat dinner, get some sleep, and forget everything you saw here."

.....I see. It seemed they had decided I was just a brat putting on an act.

The man waved his right hand at his companion and slowly moved his left hand behind his back. He was likely planning a surprise attack, but he was incredibly obvious about it.

Before his left hand could move any further:

"FREEZE ARROW!"

While the man was rambling, I released the spell I'd been chanting under my breath!

A dozen or so arrows of cold streaked through the air. Since the men had intended to catch me off guard, they were the ones who ended up blindsided; naturally, there was no way they could dodge.

Just for the record, I didn't freeze them without thinking. My reasoning was that if I had cornered them normally, they would have used the child as a hostage against me. I judged this was the best way to stop them in their tracks before that could happen. No, really.

That single strike froze the kidnappers quite easily.

It's true it took a little longer than expected to rescue the girl from the frozen sack...

"Th-thank you..." the girl said in a trembling voice as I pulled her out.

"Sure! Now then..."

She looked about five or six years old. With chestnut hair tied in pigtails on either side of her head, she was a perfectly ordinary, cute kid. Her clothes were also plain—she didn't look like a rich brat kidnapped for ransom.

I scanned the area, spotted a boulder a short distance away, and chanted:

"FIREBALL!"

The sphere of light I released slammed into the rock and burst, scattering flames with a roar.

"You're safe now. You don't have to be so scared," I said to the girl.

She shook her head with a tiny, rhythmic shudder. "I'm not. I'm cold."

Ah. Well... I did freeze her along with the men.

Once the fireball subsided, it left behind a nicely heated boulder. Startled by the sound, birds took flight from the treetops. I led the girl to the rock and, once I judged her body had warmed up sufficiently, I spoke.

"So, what's your name? Where do you live? How did this happen? And roughly how much wealth does your family have at home?"

To my gentle questioning, the girl—still shaking a bit—replied:

"..............Wow. Your ulterior motives are totally showing. You're so petty, big sister. I'm answering because I don't want my ears pulled, but it's really cold right now, so it doesn't even hurt that much when you do it."

"Honesty is a virtue," I said, nodding grandly as I let go of her ear.

"My name is Marilyn. I live in the village of Risiardo with my Papa."

"Risiardo?"

"Yeah. That way."

Wiping her nose, Marilyn held her hands toward the warm rock and pointed. She was looking toward a part of the mountain—exactly in the direction I had been heading.

I recognized the name of the village. It was precisely where I was going. I'd heard about a delicious winter vegetable there, popularly known as "Snow Asparagus." When was it I heard that? At the town at the foot of the mountain where I stopped yesterday. I'd wanted to try some there, but they were currently out of stock.

Apparently, the village deep in the mountains usually transported the produce to town, but recently a gang of bandits had settled on the mountain, making the flow of goods impossible. That's why I'd been trekking up the mountain path to go directly to the source—which led to this situation.

Truth be told, I had searched the men's pockets before helping Marilyn out of the bag, but all I found were empty wallets.

I suppose it makes sense. I couldn't imagine a group of guys moping around in the mountains during this freezing season having much of a hoard stored up. I'd just have to settle for a reward from her father—maybe as much Snow Asparagus as I could eat.

"Well, I was heading toward your village anyway, so I'll walk you back."

Marilyn nodded, her hands still held toward the rock.

I glanced at the men I'd left frozen and tumbling on the mountain path. They were likely members of the bandit gang in question. I hadn't expected much of a reward for saving a kid, but it looked like I shouldn't hope for much at all. I could always track down the rest of the gang, beat them up, and confiscate their loot, but...

As we followed the narrow trail, a cluster of roofs huddled in a mountain valley came into view. A small collection of fewer than twenty houses—that was apparently my destination, Risiardo Village.

Marilyn, her body warmed and her energy restored, trotted toward a house slightly on the outskirts. It was a small wooden home, no different from the others. As we approached, I heard a sound.

Clink, clink, clink... The sound of something hard being struck.

The sound stopped at Marilyn's call. "Papa—!"

"I'm home—!"

She opened the creaky front door and dashed inside. I followed her in.

A small room with a small fireplace. A small table with two chairs. There was a door in the back, likely leading to a bedroom.

Sitting on a low workstool by the hearth was a man. He looked to be in his late thirties or early forties. His unkempt hair and beard made him look a bit scruffy, but he might have been younger than he appeared. He had a large, sturdy frame wrapped in simple, thick-sleeved clothes that looked warm but well-worn.

He seemed to be woodcarving; various statues and wood shavings were scattered about, and he held a chisel and a wooden mallet. That was the sound I'd heard.

"Marilyn."

The man set down his tools and called his daughter's name in a low, resonant voice. Then he spared a glance for me.

"Who is this person?"

"The one who almost pulled my ears off!" Marilyn said, as he patted her head.

"Forget that part. That's enough of that," I cut in.

I turned to the man and got straight to the point. "I think they were bandits... some strange guys were trying to kidnap her."

"What!?" The man's face went pale. He stood up from his chair with a clatter. "A-and then—?"

"And then... well... I was passing by, so I saved her. That's all."

"I... I see. Then I'm in your debt."

"Papa, earlier in the mountains—"

If I let Marilyn explain, it would take forever. I looked at the man, who was knitting his brows.

"My name is Clive Towards. I make my living burning charcoal in this village."

"Charcoal? Not woodcarving?"

I looked at the carvings near the fireplace. They were likely idols of the Red Dragon God or similar motifs. They were scattered all over the room. They weren't masterpieces, but they had a certain charming touch. Depending on taste, people might actually want them for a decent price.

"I turn those into charcoal. Many say they're interesting, but they don't sell well."

...Well, of course they don't... I thought to myself. If you sold them as art, the price would naturally be high, and burning an image of a god to keep warm feels like it’s asking for a divine curse.

Regardless, if he’d introduced himself, I had to do the same.

"I'm Lina Inverse. As you can see, a traveling sorcerer."

"Lina Inverse?" Clive gave a small, involuntary flinch. "I feel like... I've heard that name somewhere..."

"Well, it's a common name," I said, quickly trying to cover it up.

When you live a life like mine—beating up bandits and blowing up mountains along with dragons—baseless, nasty rumors tend to take on a life of their own. There was no need to invite unnecessary misunderstandings by letting him remember those rumors.

"Like I said, a traveling sorcerer. I heard this village has a specialty called Snow Asparagus, so I stopped by to try some..."

I glanced toward the front door—or rather, toward the village. "Doesn't look like there are any taverns that would serve that kind of thing, though."

I was implicitly asking, "If you have some in this house, feed me," but—

"Yeah. No shops like that here," Clive answered bluntly.

Well... looks like I should give up on getting a reward from this guy.

I pulled myself together. "Right. Well then, sorry to bother you, but could you introduce me to someone suitable—maybe the village head? I'd like to find a place to stay tonight, and maybe... I can do something about those bandits who are holed up around here."

"The bandits—" Clive flinched again, just a tiny bit. He stepped into the back room for a moment and reappeared shortly after. He hadn't changed clothes or anything. "—Understood. Wait here. I'll guide you. Marilyn, come."

Accompanied by the girl, he walked over to me.

"And Lina, this is a token of gratitude for saving my daughter. Please take it."

He pressed a small leather pouch into my hand. I knew immediately by the texture and weight: it was likely gold coins. About ten of them. It wasn't an eye-popping fortune, but for someone living in a place like this, it certainly wasn't a small amount.

"Wait, but—"

"Please. Take it."

Pressed by his uncompromising tone, I quietly tucked it into my pocket.

The mountain night was silent. Or rather, I should say the mountain night during this season. If it were summer, the wind would rustle the thick leaves and the darkness would be filled with the sounds of beasts, birds, and insects.

Even with the windows closed, the biting cold crept in from nowhere.

Ultimately, after that, I was introduced to the village head. I struck a deal: I would drive away the bandits in exchange for a small fee and all the Snow Asparagus I could eat. Since the village had no inn, I stayed at the village head’s house.

And tonight’s dinner was wild bird stew and all-you-can-eat Snow Asparagus!

From the name, I had imagined something like white asparagus, but the actual thing—which the village head’s wife showed me—looked more like long-stemmed broccoli. It was a vibrant green. But when you peeled the skin off the stem, a core as white as snow appeared. You eat that part boiled with salt or sautéed in butter. It tasted like a mellowed-out version of asparagus with a natural sweetness. Even people who don't usually like asparagus would probably find this delicious.

I ate my fill and decided to start my real work tomorrow, retiring to my room for the night. I didn't bother changing into pajamas. Once Marilyn had been kidnapped, I knew the bandits were looking to make a move on this village. Expecting an attack, I slept in my regular clothes so I could move at a moment’s notice.

The silence of the night dissolved my consciousness—

I don't know how much time passed. I woke up in the darkness to the sound of an explosion.

I jumped out of bed immediately. It was likely a blast from offensive magic. My house hadn't been hit, but somewhere in the village definitely had. I quickly grabbed my cloak, shoulder guards, and short sword. I opened the window and looked out.

The lingering flames from the magic were coming from the outskirts of the village. That way—toward Clive and Marilyn's house!

It was impossible to get out through the small window. I ran out of the room toward the front door. In the living room, the village head was panicking in his nightgown. He spotted me.

"Wh-What on earth—!?"

"Bandit raid! Stay inside!"

I left the house behind. Another flash of light erupted at the edge of the village, followed quickly by an explosion. They were being quite flashy. I ran straight toward the light.

"Why now!?"

I stopped in my tracks at the sound of a familiar voice coming from the trees surrounding the village. In the distance, between the leafless trees, two shadows stood facing each other. One was the large back of Clive, whom I'd seen earlier today.

The man I faced was difficult to see in the dark, but he had a similar, sturdy build.

"I believe I gave you my answer, Clive. I said I want to borrow your strength."

The shadow growled. It was a beast-like voice meant to intimidate.

"And I believe I refused, Luzotto," Clive groaned, his voice thick with suppressed rage.

"Yeah, I heard you. But for someone to say 'No thanks' and expect me to just say 'Oh, okay' and walk away... well, that's child's play. An adult negotiation is—"

"—Boss!"

A third voice cut in. Apparently, that was the signal.

"It's an adult negotiation, Clive," the man called Luzotto said, slowly backing away. "Lend me your strength. Do that, and your daughter will be returned to you safely."

"What!? Dammit—!"

Had they really taken Marilyn? I hadn't just been standing there idly listening to their conversation, though. I had already finished my incantation!

"FREEZE ARROW!"

The cluster of ice arrows I released streaked toward the escaping shadow. Clive also kicked off the ground, lunging toward the man—

At that moment, a sudden gale whistled through the air, scattering my spell and stopping Clive in his tracks. Fallen leaves danced in the wind, making the already poor visibility even worse.

This wasn't an accident. There was an ambush—someone capable of magic had used a wind spell. I hurriedly chanted again.

"LIGHTING!"

I released a magical light toward the direction I thought the man had fled. The flash illuminated the night, but all that remained were standing withered trees and fluttering leaves. And there, standing at the edge of the light looking back at me, was Clive.

".....Lina...?"

"Talk later! Marilyn first!"

"Ah... right!"

We ran side-by-side toward Clive’s house. The explosion spell had apparently been a decoy to lure him out; the house hadn't sustained any real damage. Some leaves piled around the area were smoking slightly, but that was all.

Clive hurried to the side of the house and peered into a large jar sitting there. From his expression, I already knew the result. He had likely hidden Marilyn inside, and now, she was gone.

He thrust a trembling hand into the jar and pulled out a scrap of parchment. He stared at it for a long moment, as if trying to burn the words into his mind—

"DAMN IT! DAMN IT! DAMN IT! WHY!?"

His howl of grief echoed hollowly through the night mountains.

A black shadow moved through the white morning mist. As we reached the outskirts of the village, Clive’s footsteps came to a sudden halt. He must have noticed me following him.

Without turning around, he asked, "Why are you following me?"

"That parchment from last night. Something was written on it, wasn't it? When and where to meet, or something like that. Why are you trying to go alone?"

"This is my problem," he barked back at me.

After the incident last night, we had stayed at the village head’s house since a search in the dark was impossible. He hadn't said a word about his opponent, and I hadn't asked. As I expected, Clive had tried to slip out alone in the early morning.

Based on the conversation between Clive and Luzotto, there were clearly circumstances he didn't want the villagers to know about.

"Hmph. Don't get the wrong idea," I said, laughing off his "my problem" comment.

"Wrong idea? Are you saying you're involved in this too?"

"I'm saying this isn't just your problem; it's Marilyn's problem too."

His face twisted with bitter anguish.

"I have no interest in what happened between you and that man in the past. And if you want to go charging off on your own and get yourself killed, that’s your choice as an adult. But I can't just abandon a child who's been kidnapped without knowing why and might be sold off or killed."

He fell silent in the mist for a moment.

"......If you're truly that 'Bandit Killer' Lina Inverse... then I have a favor to ask. Come with me."

He turned and began to walk. So he did know who I was. No wonder he had that subtle reaction when I introduced myself yesterday. I followed him in silence toward his house.

"I was once... a comrade of the bandit leader, Luzotto. That man you encountered yesterday." he began to speak in a low, halting voice. "......Aren't you surprised?"

"Hmph. After hearing that guy talk, I pretty much guessed as much."

He gave a dry laugh in the mist.

"......I can use a bit of magic. In the past, I used it to commit countless crimes alongside Luzotto and the others. But one day, a child among the merchants we attacked asked me: 'Why do you do such bad things?' That was the first time I realized just how sinful my actions were..."

.....Uhm..... I felt bad for him since he was being so serious about his repentance, but... did this guy really not realize his actions were "bad" until a random kid pointed it out? I really wanted to snap at him, but I decided to just keep listening for now.

"Seven years ago, I left the bandit group. After wandering for a while, I met a woman. Marilyn's mother. We were married, moved to this village, and we were blessed with Marilyn... but two years ago, her mother died of a plague. I thought it was the price for the evil I had done in my past."

As he talked, we reached his house. He went inside.

"But... I determined that I would protect Marilyn, no matter what."

He kept talking as he went into the back room. I followed him.

"The reason I keep carving god-statues is in the hope that I can atone for my past sins, even if only a little."

Uh, no, Pops. If you're turning those into charcoal and selling them to people, I think you're kind of defeating the purpose. I offered a silent retort in my head. *Um... well, he's definitely trying to reform, but he's still a bit "off" in the head...*

He pulled out an entire drawer from a large chest in the back room.

"I forgot the past. But Luzotto had not forgotten me."

He removed the bottom panel of the drawer space to reveal a secret compartment. Inside were several gold coins.

"One day about half a month ago, he appeared before me. He said he'd let the past be bygones if I lent him my strength. Unlike seven years ago, he seems to have recruited many people who can use magic. It appears he is plotting something big."

As he spoke, he removed yet another bottom panel to reveal a third layer, packed tight with gold coins. He stuffed a handful of them into a bag, then replaced the panels and the drawer.

"I refused. And this was the move he took—kidnapping Marilyn. I must be the one to settle things with my past."

He held the bag of gold out to me.

"I want you to witness it. And... if my strength falls short, I want you to save Marilyn."

"......Alright."

I nodded and accepted it.

"My apologies. Well then, let us go."

I followed Clive out of the house, but I circled around to the side.

"Wait, there's something I want to ask..."

As we walked through the pathless wilderness, I questioned him. The mist in the biting morning air was thinning, and visibility was improving.

"That money in the chest... I'm guessing you didn't just 'earn' it. You swiped it when you left the bandit group, didn't you?"

"I did... why are you clutching your head and crouching?"

Oh, this oblivious old man. I stood back up abruptly.

"Listen! You said you forgot but they didn't, but if you steal a hoard of gold when you run away, of course they aren't going to forget you!"

"I see..." He thought about it for a moment. "So that's how it is."

"YES."

"Indeed, I suppose I am a bit ignorant of the subtleties of the human heart."

"I don't think 'subtleties' or 'a bit' covers the level of the problem here... wait."

"It's about time we stopped talking."

A powerful, palpable hostility was wafting from up ahead. He must have noticed it too.

Clive slowly stepped forward. A single presence stood waiting in the thin morning mist. I stopped and lowered my voice.

"I'll wait in a spot where they can't see me—"

"I know. First, I'll try to handle this myself."

Clive took out the scrap of parchment he'd found last night to confirm the location. A morning breeze brushed the slope, blowing away the remaining mist.

"Where is Marilyn!?" Clive called out. I watched from a distance at the side.

The figure facing the large Clive was clearly different from the Luzotto we'd seen yesterday. It was a smaller shadow of a man, likely in his mid-twenties, with messy blonde hair and an unhealthily thin frame. I didn't recognize the face, but I could guess who he was. Bandit Subordinate #1, most likely.

The man pulled a piece of parchment from his coat.

"I'm Gatol."

He picked up a stone from his feet, wrapped it in the parchment, and tossed it at Clive's feet.

".....I don't get it. Why is the Boss so obsessed with an old man like you? I really don't like it."

"Where is Luzotto!?" Clive asked urgently.

"The kid is safe. The Boss isn't coming."

The voice was young and sounded incredibly spiteful.

"That parchment says where you're supposed to go next."

"What do you mean!?"

"Next? Yeah. But that's only if you can beat me!"

As he spoke, the man leaped back a great distance and began to chant an incantation at the top of his lungs!

"Wait! What are you doing!?"

"Explain! What on earth...!"

"FIREBALL!"

Cutting off Clive's words, the explosion of an offensive spell shook the morning air!

(Break of Destiny: To be continued!)

Break of Destiny [Part 2]

Synopsis

Seeking a taste of a local specialty, Lina headed toward a mountain village. Along the way, she rescued a young girl named Marilyn from bandits and returned her to her father, Clive.

However, that night, the village was raided, and Marilyn was kidnapped! Clive set out to rescue her, and Lina accompanied him. On the road, Clive confessed: he was once a comrade of the bandit leader, Luzotto. Luzotto had kidnapped Marilyn to force Clive to lend him his strength for some scheme.

Clive declared he would settle the scores of his past himself. But at the designated meeting spot, Marilyn was nowhere to be found. Instead, a bandit waiting there gave them their next destination before attacking Clive without further word!

The echoes of the explosion resonated through the mountains, and scorched leaves, caught in the wind, danced down trailing wisps of white smoke.

"......So, words are useless then....."

Crouched low, a short distance from where the Fireball had detonated, Clive muttered in a suppressed voice. Faint trails of smoke drifted from the edges of his clothes; it seemed he hadn't managed to dodge the blast completely.

"Very well. I have no grudge against you, but if the only way forward is to defeat you, then so be it! Here I come!"

"That's the spirit!"

In response to Clive’s words, the man who called himself Gatol roared! The two began to run in a circle, measuring the distance between them, and started chanting their spells simultaneously.

Clive was the first to strike!

"FLARE ARROW!"

With his shout, arrows of flame appeared in the void. Their number was—

Just two.

...Uh-oh. This is looking pretty bad.

This spell increases the number of arrows based on the caster's magical power. For the record, my personal best is sixteen. For him to only produce two...

Well, that’s just how it was. A high-level caster could manipulate the spell’s structure to intentionally limit the number, but I didn't think he was doing that right now.

"Go!"

The released arrows of flame flew straight toward Gatol—and were dodged with effortless ease.

Just as I thought. As he dodged, the opponent released his own finished spell!

"FIREBALL!"

An explosion.

Clive tumbled across the earth, barely managing to dodge, and immediately began chanting again. He fired two more Flare Arrows, which Gatol dodged with room to spare.

Clive’s third attack and Gatol’s second attack happened almost simultaneously.

"Now I shall break the seal! Rise, my magic! Behold! This is the true Flare Arrow!"

With a shout, Clive tore something from his wrists and ankles beneath his long sleeves and trousers.

CRASH!

A crimson flame pushed back the mist, and when it subsided—there stood Gatol, and a patch of scorched earth. Further away, Clive lay face down!

"......Urgh....."

"What!?"

He groaned and tried to pick himself up. Toward the shocked Gatol, I raised my voice in astonishment.

"It’s almost a draw!?"

It seemed it hadn't been a direct hit... but it was about time for me to make my move.

"Impossi—"

TH-TH-TH-TH-BOOM!

Gatol’s death scream was swallowed by the flames, and his charred body fell with a thud.

—That’s one.

I jumped out from my hiding spot and ran toward Clive.

"Are you okay? Any injuries?"

"Yeah. Just a scratch," he said, dusting off his clothes. His outfit was scorched and torn in places, but it looked like he hadn't taken any serious wounds.

I looked down at the things Clive had thrown away just a moment ago. There were four of them—two for the hands and two for the feet. He must have been using these to suppress his magic... but for that, they just looked like tattered cloth bands.

"Huh?"

I let out a small groan. I leaned over to pick one up. It was heavy. Incredibly so. To think he was fighting while wearing these...

"They have weights inside," Clive said, watching me. "My magic mentor taught me. Keep them on at all times, and when the time comes to remove them, your true power will be released. But I never imagined my magic would power up this much..."

"—Wait, that’s the wrong way to power up!"

Clive turned to me, looking stunned by my retort.

"Are you stupid!? Normally! Anyone would think that throwing away heavy weights would improve your endurance or speed! Not your magic!"

I shook my head slowly at his "logical" opinion, but he insisted:

"No, you’re wrong! You’re definitely wrong....."

A dark suspicion flashed in the corner of my mind, and I asked in a low voice:

".....I hope I'm wrong, but... Clive, your mentor... she wasn't some weird sorceress who wore excessively revealing clothes, was she...?"

"No, she wasn't."

...Whew... thank goodness... If he had said yes, I wouldn't have known what to do with myself. I wiped the sticky sweat from my forehead.

He had certainly increased his magical power by removing the weights. That was an undeniable fact. But looking at the bands lying there, they appeared to be nothing more than cloth scraps filled with weights.

Well, I suppose it was possible the material inside had some kind of magical property.

"More importantly. Let’s head to the next point."

Indeed, I could investigate that later. He stared at the parchment he’d taken from the man for a moment.

"This way."

"R-right. So, where to next?"

Leaving the weighted bands where they lay, he began to walk deep into the woods.

"Ho-ho. So you beat Gatol. It seems you’re somewhat capable."

The man waiting for Clive at the designated second point was a large, fat man draped in furs. However, it wasn't the lazy fat often seen in wealthy nobles. This was a body built by moving, eating well, and having a solid layer of muscle and fat—that kind of build.

He wouldn't be very agile, but his power and durability would be high. I circled around to the side again and sized him up that way.

"But! Don't get overconfident! Gatol was just the smallest fry among us!"

Clive faced the blustering oaf with a sullen expression.

"And my daughter..... where is Marilyn?"

"Hmph. Don't be in such a hurry."

The large man took a parchment from his coat, placed it on the ground, and set a stone on top as a weight.

"If you want to know, defeat me, Megist, and go to the place written here!"

Oh boy, here we go again... I wanted to jump in from the side and finish him off quickly so we could keep moving, but I’d promised not to interfere as much as possible.

"Understood. Then here I come!"

Taking Clive's voice as a signal, the two began chanting their spells at the same time—

"......!"

Clive was the one who groaned and aborted his chant just before completion. Seeing this, the large man’s mouth curled into a grin.

I see. Of the many offensive spells, the most popular are the fire-based ones. Among those, Flare Arrow is often chosen because of its ease of learning and its destructive power.

The large man had predicted Clive would use something like that, so he had intentionally placed the parchment at his own feet. If Clive targeted him with a fire spell, the parchment would burn, and the clues to Marilyn’s whereabouts would be lost.

Exactly as he’d predicted—the spell Clive had started and then canceled was Flare Arrow.

This loss of time was a serious blow. In that gap, the large man’s spell was completed!

"AIR KALEID!"

The moment the "Words of Power" were released, the surroundings shimmered like a heat haze, and five more men with the exact same appearance appeared around Clive!

An illusion!?

“My spell, Megist's art, manipulates the wind to create multiple forms and voices! You won't be able to tell which is the real body!”

Uh, excuse me. I hate to spoil your bragging, but anyone can tell the one standing in the original position is the real one.

Clive, however, seemed just as confused.

"......Kuh! Which one is the real one!?"

"What!?" Megist shouted in shock.

“Hahaha! Are you surprised!?”

The boastful voice of the large man echoed from six directions at once.

"Hah! I see.....! My mentor said it before... Use your eyes!"

With that, he suddenly closed his eyes while chanting! Closing your eyes in a situation like this!?

“Are you trying to bluff me!? Or have you quietly accepted your fate!?”

...Is he an idiot?

"Not with your eyes, but with your mind's eye!"

This is bad!

The large man pulled a throwing knife from his furs and hurled it toward Clive!

Just as I was about to scream—Clive stepped one pace to the side in silence. The knife sliced through the space where Clive had been standing a split second before.

“What!? You dodged it!?” the large man cried in shock.

Clive’s eyes snapped open! —*I see him!* I felt like I could almost hear that shout in his voice.

And then:

"MIND'S EYE BOMBERRRRRRR!"

BOOOOOM!

Along with the shout of a nonsensical finishing-move name, an explosion centered on Clive expanded, swallowing the large man and all his illusions.

The clearing, once blanketed in fallen leaves, had been transformed into a small crater. Standing at its center was Clive, casting a hollow gaze toward the large man lying motionless on the ground. He muttered softly to himself.

".....So this is... the power of the Mind’s Eye."

"NO IT ISN’T!"

As if such a "Mind’s Eye" existed in this world. I snapped at him immediately. Despite the weird name, what he’d just used was a type of offensive spell. Categorically, it was a variation of *Dill Brand*. It was incredibly similar to the spell that causes the ground in a donut shape around the caster to erupt vertically, using the debris as a projectile attack. He had simply blasted the ground around his feet in all directions with explosive force. Naturally, it had nothing to do with any "Mind’s Eye." The keyword for the activation just happened to be "Mind’s Eye Bomber."

Clive looked over at me with a weary expression. "Again? What is it this time?"

"I’m telling you, the 'Mind's Eye' isn't something like that!"

"What are you saying? My mentor said, 'The secret technique for striking an unseen enemy—that is the Mind's Eye.' Are you saying she was wrong?"

"The statement itself isn't wrong, but... ugh, forget it! More importantly—what are we going to do about *this*!?"

I gestured toward our surroundings. The dirt and debris scattered by the blast half-buried the large man’s body. Consequently...

"The parchment with the next location is completely buried. Digging it out is going to be a pain."

"......I see. It seems the power of the Mind's Eye was simply too great....."

"Yeah, whatever... just... everything is fine. Anyway, let’s get to work and find that parchment."

I sensed that it would be better to conserve my energy for snapping at him later, so the two of us began digging through the dirt to recover the parchment.

The battle continued. We arrived at each designated location only to find one of the bandit's subordinates waiting. Once defeated, we’d find a parchment indicating the next spot. It was a tedious cycle.

The enemies waiting for us varied—some were strong, some were weak, some used magic, and others used direct attacks—but there was always exactly one person at each location. Clive dealt with every single one of them with grim earnestness, defeating them with techniques or logic that were invariably "off" in some way.

Of course, by mid-journey, I had given up on trying to correct his every word and action.

"......Tell me..... how many more of you are there?"

By the time the sun had long passed its zenith, Clive asked this question with visible exhaustion to a slim man facing him.

"Heh heh heh. Don't worry. This little entertainment ends here."

"Then..... Marilyn is at the next location. And Luzotto too."

"That’s right. But don't get the wrong idea! I said the entertainment ends here because you end here...!"

Thwack.

Without waiting for the man to finish his sentence, Clive hurled a stone that struck him square in the face. It seemed he, too, had finally run out of patience. He searched the fallen man's pockets, pulled out a parchment, and—

"The final stretch, then."

"Yeah. It looks that way," he said, giving me a firm nod as I walked up to him.

Deep in the mountain range stood an old hunter's cabin that had long fallen out of use. Clad in the blackened grime of passing years and standing amidst withered trees, it looked almost like a ruin. A single man stood waiting at the doorway.

His frame, encased in leather armor, was very similar to Clive's. A goatee and a scar across his forehead made him look slightly older, but if one looked past that, he was likely the same age as Clive, or perhaps slightly younger.

"I've come, Luzotto."

"I've been waiting, Clive."

Clive and the bandit leader, Luzotto. The two finally stood face-to-face. This was the moment of truth.

This time, I wasn't just going to watch. I kept my distance and stayed hidden, masking my presence as I kept watch. My role was to find out exactly where Marilyn was and rescue her the moment I saw an opening.

"You haven't changed, Clive," Luzotto spoke with a strangely familiar tone. "Your magic still increases based on your mood, just like the old days. I wondered if you could really do it, but to actually defeat all my subordinates... you really are impressive."

Magic increasing based on mood...? No such ridiculous thing should be possible... and yet, the fact remained that his magic had increased the moment he took off those weights.

I see. It was the other way around.

I finally understood Clive's nonsense. Basically, Clive naturally possessed high magical power, but when he wasn't "in the mood," a mental inhibition would kick in, preventing him from using his full strength. That was why, when he wore the weights and firmly believed "I cannot exert high magical power right now," he could only fire two weak Flare Arrows.

But right now, Clive's tension was undoubtedly at its peak. He could exert his full power without issue.

"Enough talk! Where is Marilyn!?"

To his question, asked with suppressed rage, Luzotto’s mouth twisted into a grin.

"Now, don't get so angry. Your daughter is safe. Our business is concluded. You can take her home."

Luzotto spoke in a purring voice and opened the door to the cabin behind him.

"Papaaaa!"

At that moment, Marilyn jumped out, dressed in baggy pajamas, and ran toward Clive.

"Marilyn!"

Clive knelt and opened his arms wide, embracing his child as she ran to him.

"I was so scaaared—!"

Clive gently stroked the back of the sobbing Marilyn. "Are you alright? Did they do anything terrible to you?"

"Mm-hmm... they didn't even pull my ears..."

I told her to forget that part.

"I see... thank goodness. You’re safe now."

Luzotto looked down at the two of them with a cold gaze. "A touching father-daughter reunion, eh? Well then, I’ll be going."

He spun on his heel—

"——Wait!"

It was Clive’s voice that stopped him from leaving.

"What is the meaning of this, Luzotto!? You said you needed to borrow my strength!"

That was true. Luzotto had supposedly kidnapped Marilyn specifically to force Clive to lend his aid. Yet here he was, returning Marilyn so easily and trying to leave. It made no sense. It was as if he had simply wanted to make Clive fight his subordinates.

When questioned, Luzotto looked back over his shoulder with an air of annoyance.

"You don't need to know. The job is done. That’s all there is to it."

Clive refused to let it go. "That won't do! There’s no guarantee you won't come back for the same reason someday and repeat this all over again!"

"A useless worry."

"Do you think I can rest easy hearing that!?" Clive stood up slowly. "Besides, the fact remains that you kidnapped Marilyn. I cannot simply let that slide!"

Luzotto turned back fully. "Then, what will you do?"

Their gazes clashed, sparks flying. Keeping his eyes fixed on Luzotto, Clive lightly patted Marilyn’s head.

"Marilyn, go wait over there for a bit. There’s a good girl."

"......Okay....." She nodded slightly and trotted over to the shade of a nearby tree.

Having seen her to safety, Clive walked quietly toward Luzotto and raised his fist.

"This is for Marilyn!"

WHACK!

Luzotto didn't even try to dodge the blow; he simply leaned back to kill the momentum and took it on his cheek.

"......Are you satisfied now?" He asked, glaring as he stepped half a pace back.

.....Something was definitely strange. After doing all this, he looked like he just wanted to settle things as quietly as possible and leave. But of course, Clive wasn't about to be satisfied with that.

"Not yet!"

He stepped in and threw another punch. "This is for Dorothy!"

"WHO IS THAT!?"

Luzotto dodged this time, stepping back to create distance.

"That doesn't matter!"

"Of course it matters! Usually!"

"Shut up! If you keep this up, I’ll have no choice but to step in. If that happens, your daughter might get caught in the—"

"—Boss!"

Clive and Luzotto both spun around in shock at the voice that cut through the air. It was the entire group of Luzotto’s subordinates that Clive had defeated! A few had dropped out, but there were still about a dozen of them. Clive let out a small groan.

"You’re better than I thought, old man. I'll give you that," said the one I recognized as Gatol, the first man we’d fought. "But you can't possibly win against this many of us, can you?"

"That’s right. It’d be smarter to just listen to what the Boss says," added another man.

Not only Clive, but Luzotto’s expression twitched slightly as well. It was as if he hated the fact that his subordinates had shown up.

.....This is..... could it be.....?

An idea formed in my head.

"Do you really think so?" I asked.

All eyes turned toward the source of the voice as I stepped out from hiding.

"Who are you!?" barked Subordinate #1.

I ignored them and looked at the bandits. "It doesn't matter who I am. But... are you guys really okay with this? If things keep going like this, your Boss is going to keep all the treasure for himself."

Luzotto and his men cried out at the same time. "Wh... What kind of nonsense are you talking about!?"

I stared back at the pale-faced Luzotto with total composure. "I wonder which of us is talking nonsense. He returns the hostage the moment Clive arrives and says, 'The job is done, go home'... that's what doesn't make sense."

The subordinates all turned their eyes toward Luzotto at once.

"But," I said, holding up a finger. "If you consider that Luzotto wanted to keep all the treasure you gathered for himself, it all makes sense."

"Don't be ridiculous.....!" Luzotto’s voice was loud, but a thin layer of sweat was breaking out on his forehead.

I pressed on regardless. "To do something big, you need power. That's why Luzotto brought in all of you—people who can even use offensive spells—as subordinates. But naturally, the cut for people who can use magic is higher. So, you have to do big jobs to make it worth it. To do big

jobs, you need even more powerful people. And for that, you need more money... It's a vicious cycle. The organization's size and the scale of the work just keep ballooning."

"But if you do something *too* big, the army will eventually get serious about wiping you out. Luzotto had a feeling that would happen someday."

I looked back at Clive. "It was the same for you, wasn't it? He wouldn't give you a reason, and he seemed like he wanted to leave as soon as possible."

Clive spoke as he slowly backed away from Luzotto toward where Marilyn was hiding.

I turned back to the leader. "So, you thought of this: If someone were to defeat all your subordinates for you, you could keep the treasure all to yourself."

The bandits began to murmur again.

"What a stupid dream," Luzotto insisted, but the light of suspicion that had ignited in his men's eyes wasn't going to vanish.

"You could have just run off with the treasure, but then you'd have to worry about them hunting you down forever. If they're all defeated by someone else, you don't have that worry. So, you searched for an old comrade while you were thinking about that, and you found out where Clive lived."

"You declared you were bringing him back into the fold and praised him to high heaven in front of everyone. Naturally, your current subordinates weren't going to like that. You fanned their competitive spirits until they eventually suggested testing his strength themselves—am I wrong?"

The subordinates looked at each other as I turned my gaze on them. "Now that you mention it....."

"He even told me I wasn't fit to lick Clive's boots," one whispered.

The group began to huddle and whisper, clearly remembering similar instances.

"You idiots! Why are you listening to the lies of some unknown girl!? Can't you see she's just trying to turn us against each other!?" Luzotto shouted at them.

But criminals are the type who never trust others when money is involved. To drive the point home, I looked at Luzotto.

"Then you can explain, right? Why you kidnapped Clive's daughter only to return her immediately—what were you actually trying to achieve? If you have an answer other than what I just said, I'd love to hear it."

"......I don't have to tell you anything!" Luzotto tried to act tough, but I wasn't about to flinch.

"Maybe not. But don't you have a duty to explain it to your subordinates?"

Luzotto had absolutely nothing to say to that.

"Boss..... what is the meaning of this?"

One of the subordinates asked in an ominous tone.

"Care to explain? Depending on your answer—"

Luzotto was sweating buckets.

"N-now, listen... it's just that, lately you guys have been getting overconfident, so I thought I'd teach you that the world is a big place, and..."

"Even though you could have just told them?"

I cut through his pathetic excuse with a breezy remark and added, "Oh. Or maybe you've already moved the treasure somewhere else?"

"Th-that's impossible! It's right there in the hideout!"

"I don't know, sounds suspicious to me. We'll probably need to go check and see if the treasure is actually still there."

I looked toward the subordinates. "Where is the hideout?"

"It's on the other side of Cedar Valley," one of them answered, his gaze still fixed on Luzotto with pure rage.

Yes. Hook, line, and sinker.

"Hey! Why are you blabbing, you idiot!?" another shouted in a panic, but it was too late.

I figured there would be at least one. An airhead who, if I directed their attention to Luzotto's betrayal, would let the location of the hideout slip.

"Sh-shut up! We just have to finish them off and that'll be the end of it!"

The airhead tried to patch things up, but it was too late. I had already begun my incantation.

Clive hurriedly scooped up Marilyn and ran to my side. He pointed toward our opponents and said, "Oh, right. I'm late in introducing her to you all, but this lady has agreed to lend me her strength this time... this is Miss Lina Inverse."

Luzotto, his subordinates, and the rest of the bandit troupe let out a collective groan. It seemed they finally realized who I was.

But it was far too late.

The Dragon Slave I unleashed blew Luzotto and his men away, and altered the shape of the mountain just a tiny bit.

Peace and vitality returned to the small mountain village for the first time in a long while. There was no longer anything to obstruct travel to the town at the foot of the mountain. The bandits who had been camping nearby were wiped out, and the shipping of the famous Snow Asparagus resumed. With all the buyers coming from town, the village's population looked like it had nearly doubled.

To be honest, this job turned out to be quite lucrative for me. I got to eat my fill of the famous Snow Asparagus at the village head’s house, and I received a reward from Clive as well.

Naturally, with Clive acting as my guide, I paid a visit to the bandit hideout I'd scouted out and confiscated every last bit of their treasure.

Truly, when one maintains good conduct in their daily life, good things like this tend to happen.

"I'm in your debt."

"Take care~"

With Clive and Marilyn waving goodbye, I left the small village in the mountains behind.

All’s well that ends well.

(Break of Destiny: End)

The Eve of Battle [Part 1]

Right now, I was surrounded.

Well, let's set that aside for a moment. After all, the world is a dangerous place. It's a common enough story for bandits or monsters like goblins to attack travelers. Since I spend my life traveling like this, I've been subjected to such raids many times.

Naturally, I've turned the tables on every single one of them. In the first place, the very idea of bandits or goblins picking a fight with me—Lina Inverse, warrior and genius sorcerer—was... well, let's set that aside too.

Anyway, I was quite used to this kind of situation. However—this time, things were a bit different.

I can usually tell just by the presence whether the opponent is a group of bandits or a pack of goblins, and roughly how many there are. But this time, I couldn't tell.

I was certain there were many of them... but for a mere pack of goblins... how should I put it... the presence was far too inconsistent. I couldn't pin down the identity of the enemy. That felt incredibly unsettling.

Despite that uneasy feeling, I continued walking at a steady pace along the rustic highway winding through the mountains. My travels were aimless, but if I heard there was a famous dish somewhere, I'd go and eat my fill; if I heard there were bandits, I'd go thrash them, confiscate their treasure, and collect a reward from the locals. It was during such a journey that I happened upon this place.

But to be surrounded by unknown entities in a place like this...

As I walked, debating whether to pass through as if I hadn't noticed or to try and draw them out, the tense silence was broken by the sound of birds taking flight from the treetops.

That was the signal.

Rustle, rustle, CRASH!

Emerging from the leaves and grass were goblins, orcs, and minotaurs. Kobolds, harpies, lizardmen, and so on. A motley crew of various "Beasts of Darkness"—intelligent, harmful creatures. Their number was ten, twenty, or perhaps even more.

At this sight, seen for the first time, I caught my breath slightly.

This shouldn't have been possible. Ordinarily, creatures of the same race might group together, but you never saw different races mixing like this. In fact, if different races had overlapping territories, they were known to fight each other.

For them to be standing shoulder to shoulder like this to attack a human was unheard of. It was an extremely rare case—but this was no time to be a casual observer. It was only natural to brush off the sparks falling on me!

Just then, as I was calmly chanting a spell under my breath—

"That is enough!"

The voice that echoed through the trees was a man's resonant call.

—*What!?*

Who is it!? Where are you!? Show yourself!

The Beasts of Darkness were likely saying something along those lines, barking and howling as they peered around—

There!

Following the cry of a harpy, everyone's gaze concentrated on a single point. In the interplay of light and shadow cast by the sun filtering through the trees, he stood quietly.

Judging by his features, he looked to be in his twenties. He had a straight nose, arched eyebrows, and loosely waving golden hair. He was so beautiful he could be mistaken for a woman, the kind of "pretty boy" who looked like he should be carrying a rose in his mouth.

I assumed he was a man... but I couldn't judge that from his physique.

After all, it wasn't a human body.

The body of a lion with the wings of a bat. A scorpion's tail extending from behind.

Yes. Appearing gallantly before me as I was surrounded by the Beasts of Darkness was, without a doubt, a manticore.

Manticores are powerful Beasts of Darkness, though their fame lags far behind that of mighty dragons or the common goblin due to their low numbers.

Normally, they are supposed to have the face of an old man... well... humans all have different faces, so I suppose it’s not impossible for a "pretty boy" manticore to exist... I think...

The manticore stepped forward slowly, and the opposing Beasts of Darkness backed away as if intimidated.

Judging the timing, he stopped and spoke.

"Were you ordered to attack humans? Surely not? Then this should be meaningless."

The language he used to address the beasts was almost identical to the language used by dragons. Having studied Draconic at the Sorcerer’s Guild, I could understand the general meaning.

He looked around at the crowd.

"Withdraw from here. Go back and tell Gorpa: Your methods are wrong. I, Megiga, will surely stop you."

The Beasts of Darkness groaned at his words.

"What is the matter? Go on. Or do you intend to fight me pointlessly, even though Gorpa did not order it?"

Prompted by the manticore, the gathered beasts remained silent for a moment before slowly retreating. Eventually, they and their presences vanished into the depths of the forest.

.....It felt like... there were a lot of complicated circumstances here...

I turned toward the handsome manticore.

"At any rate, I should say thanks. Thank you."

When I spoke in Draconic, the manticore’s face formed an expression of surprise.

"You understand our tongue? Human girl?"

"Well, I studied a bit of Draconic," I said with a wink.

Of course, since human vocal cords aren't designed to pronounce Draconic perfectly, I probably sounded like I had a heavy accent to him.

However, the meaning seemed to have gotten across.

"It seems my companions have startled you, and I apologize."

"Companions? Not enemies?"

My pointed question caused his expression to cloud over slightly.

"..... .....I suppose so..... Perhaps it would be better for you humans to know the truth of this matter..."

I gave a small, internal nod. *So that's what it meant.*

"I have heard that among you humans, you join your forelegs together as a sign of having no hostile intent."

He extended his right foreleg toward me as he spoke.

"It’s called a handshake."

I responded by grasping his extended paw with my right hand. His paw pads were much softer than I had expected.

"If you don't mind, would you be willing to hear my story?"

Hmm. I usually tried to avoid getting tangled up in troublesome affairs, but the fact remained that he had saved me. Plus, I was a little curious about how things had ended up this way.

"Sure... well, first, let's introduce ourselves. I'm Lina. Lina Inverse."

"My name is Megiga."

He used his right foreleg to toss his loosely waved golden mane back in a sweeping motion. "In our tongue, it means 'one who adores the white lily.'"

That’s a surprisingly classy origin story, honestly.

"Come to think of it, you mentioned that name earlier... but are you a manticore like him?"

I leaned my back against the trunk of a nearby tree and asked. His expression sank.

"Yes. In our tongue, 'Gorba' means 'tough wings.'"

"He is not the only one who perceives us as a threat. You see, Gorba, a former friend of mine, is exactly like that."

He looked toward a small town visible from a hill just off the road, his voice filled with fascination. "Humans are amazing. Even at night, you light lamps and behave as if you are having a wonderful time."

I looked at him. *Hmm... if he weren't a manticore, this would be quite a picturesque scene.*

"You are not particularly tough, yet you continue to develop by combining strength and wisdom. But because of that..." He paused, his voice trailing off.

"So, you're saying Gorba views that as a threat?"

"Yes. At one time, we spent our days together like family. But one night, Gorba and I secretly flew over a human town. I simply thought it looked fun, but Gorba interpreted it as a threat. Since then, he has been preaching the 'human threat' to everyone—not just manticores, but goblins and harpies alike."

"But manticores eat people, don't they?"

He smiled bitterly. "It is true that some of us eat humans, but that doesn't mean all of us do. You humans eat animals, but you don't eat every single species, do you? Humans are not our only concern."

He continued, his voice growing heavy. "He gathered many creatures and began moving under his command. At first, no one paid him much mind. They thought demons and dragons were far more powerful, so there was no need to fear humans just because of their numbers. But then, an incident occurred. A Blue Dragon—a creature that should have been immensely powerful—was blown away, mountain and all, by human magic."

Wait, I've blown away mountains with spells a few times myself... that must have been a coincidence. Yes, a coincidence!

"After that, more began to listen to Gorba's theories. Many different races have conspired to attack humans. But if they do, humans will naturally band together to defeat us. Humans will come to hate us, and we will come to hate humans. If that happens, I will inevitably be attacked by humans, too. I don't want that. That is why I want to stop them now."

I nodded slowly. "I don't want to see a war like that either. Fine, I'll lend you my strength."

Megiga beamed at me, his three rows of white fangs creating a smile that was, frankly, a little terrifying. "Thank you! Then you can go to the town and tell someone about this..."

"Whoa, no, no! That won't work." I waved my hands. "Even if I told them, would they believe me? And even if they did, it would just turn into a war between humans and everyone else anyway. We have to stop them. Just you and me."

"You? You alone?" Megiga looked bewildered.

"Listen. If you use force to stop them, Gorba will just assume his theory is correct anyway and try again later. We have to show them that it's not that simple. I need to show them that humans have enough power to make them think twice about attacking."

Megiga looked at me with a dubious gaze, his eyes darting all over my form. Well, I couldn't blame him. It’s hard to tell if this cute, refined young lady (note: for some reason, no one believes me, but that’s me) has the power to face off against an army of beasts.

"I’m Lina Inverse. I’m plenty strong. Now, about these hideouts—you said they were watching the road. Why build a hideout in a place like this if they’re just going to watch it?"

Megiga shook his head. "I do not know the details. But I imagine they might be planning to attack the town to solidify their resolve and unity."

"I see..." I muttered, looking toward the peaceful town basking in the afternoon sun.

I had Megiga wait in the mountains while I began my inquiries. I walked up to a woman passing by and asked if anything had been unusual lately.

"Well, it’s not often travelers like you come through here, but... it is unusual that two people have come in a single day."

"Two?"

"Yes. Besides you, there was someone else. A person in a strange outfit was wandering around the west plaza a while ago."

Strange outfit? I felt a cold dread. "Where is the west plaza?"

"Go straight down this street, and you’ll find the central plaza with the flowerbeds. Head west from there."

"Thanks!"

I raced toward the plaza. Sure enough, there he was—or rather, there was a strange, cloth-covered silhouette looming over a tipsy middle-aged man.

"HAHAHA. Other than myself, there is no anomaly in the village, beautiful young lady. Oh! Lina-san! What are you doing? Shifting into a quadrupedal form in a place like this?"

"......No..... just....."

I collapsed on the spot. Even if he was standing on his hind legs, the sheer size and the non-human face made him look incredibly grotesque. It was a miracle the woman had just called him a "person in a strange outfit."

He flashed a wide grin at the drunkard, waved a wooden-carved hand protruding from the cloth, and said, "An acquaintance has arrived, so I must go. Thank you, and forever stay beautiful young lady."

"You too, buddy," the drunkard mumbled.

"It is what humans mean when they say 'Look, all the people look just like ants.'"

"No, that’s not it. That’s different."

After exchanging greetings that could very well have been a goodbye, I waited for the drunkard to leave before Megiga approached me.

"How was it? Did you leak any good information? Also, the fact that you immediately saw through my perfect disguise speaks to your excellent eyesight. By the way, I would like to file a formal opinion regarding the necessity of greater mutual understanding concerning your three-stage transformation from a quadrupedal form to a sleeping form?"

"......No..... well..... about that....."

Even while lying collapsed on the ground, I mustered what little energy I had left, put strength into my limbs, and leaned against the wall of a nearby building to finally pull myself upright.

"But anyways you could speak human language all along?"

"In ancient times, I was taught by an acquaintance of yours."

"WHAT!? Where did you learn that!!"

"Well... when that human heard me speak his language, he held his stomach with both hands and laughed heartily, praising it as 'perfect.'"

...I see... the mentor I happened to have was a bad one, then.

I didn't want to point out every single weird thing he said—it would be a never-ending task—but my energy was just draining away the more he spoke.

"......That’s fine, I guess..... but why are you in a place like this in that outfit.....?"

He pulled his wooden-carved hand from beneath his cloak, tossed his golden mane back with a *flick*, and replied: "Lina-san, you told me to wait. You said you were going to interrogate the humans in town. But if that’s the case, two is better than one. A larger number is a good thing."

I looked at him with half-lidded, weary eyes. "...Actually, are you just... incredibly obsessed with humans?"

"OH! That is negative! Infidelity is not cultural!"

Well... sure... I sighed, scratching the back of my head. "...For starters... don't use 'beautiful young lady' when talking to a man."

"OH! That has transcended human wisdom!" *So he didn't know.* "But it is highly difficult for me to distinguish between human men and women."

Fair enough. Distinguishing the gender of other species at a glance isn't easy. For creatures like us, if there's no major external difference, it's impossible to tell. To a manticore, men and women probably just look like humans wrapped in cloth.

"I see. A simple way to tell is that women have breasts—"

I suddenly had an idea. "Wait here."

I turned on my heel and walked toward the children. Perhaps they knew something from running around the mountains.

"Tell me, tell me!"

I waved at the kids and crouched down, lowering my voice. "Hey, have you seen anything weird near town lately? Anything strange that adults would call 'a lie' if you told them?"

A boy with black hair leaned forward, his eyes sparkling. "Oh! I was told by my dad! I saw something weird in the mountains! It was huge, and it had the head of a cow!"

A minotaur—then they are definitely with that group.

"Whoa, a cow head? I want to see that too!" I said, feigning envy.

The boy puffed out his chest. "I saw it."

"Me too."

"Me too!" they shouted.

"Where, where? Tell me!"

The moment I asked, their expressions shifted. They looked at each other, eyes darting around, and clammed up. *Aha... so they are hiding something.*

I flashed a sly grin and whispered, "It's near your secret base, right?"

"Wh...!"

"How do you know that!?"

The children cried out in shock. It was just as I suspected. Boys this age, for some reason, are inexplicably drawn to secret bases—whether it's a cave, a shack, or a simple hole dug in the earth. I used to be pretty mischievous myself as a kid; I remember tracking down the boys' secret base in my neighborhood and launching a siege with my sister.

But I knew that if I just demanded the location, they wouldn't talk.

"Tell you what," I said, leaning in. "If you tell me where the cow-headed guy was, I'll tell you a secret of his in return."

"Really!!??"

"What secret!?"

"Tell us, tell us!"

Their eyes were sparkling.

"I'll tell you if you tell me. And of course, I'll never tell anyone else about your base. Ever."

"Really?"

"Cross your heart?"

"You won't tell?"

"Absolutely. But in exchange, you have to keep his secret a total mystery from everyone else. Deal?"

"Deal!" the kids chimed in unison.

"Then guide me there. And one more thing—" I glanced toward Megiga waiting behind me and lowered my voice further. "This is a secret trade. If you show me, I'll tell you his secret."

They nodded solemnly.

".....I see..... this is indeed a magnificent secret base."

I muttered to myself as I peered into the depths of the woods. It was in the mountains south of town. Perhaps there had been a landslide recently; a black hole yawned in the red clay slope—the entrance to some sort of ruin.

Shadows lurked around the entrance: a minotaur wielding a massive club, and several goblins holding pieces of wood that could barely be called weapons.

"......By the way, Lina-san....."

Megiga, who had now removed his cloak to reveal his true form, whispered to me as he crouched by my side. "Regarding the abandonment of those children, the affirmative opinion is in the minority." He pointed his scorpion tail toward the bushes. The three boys who had guided us were lying there—I had given them a quick chop to the back of the neck to knock them unconscious.

"There was no other way. If I'd told them not to come, they wouldn't have led us here. We'll win, and then we'll take them back home. That's all there is to it."

Megiga sent a worried look toward the kids. "Fighting Gorba with children in tow is ill-advised."

"Not 'in tow,' just... left behind," I corrected. "Whatever. You can speak in your own language now, you know. Listening to your human speech is exhausting."

Megiga shook his head slightly. "Your Draconic is exhausting to listen to, Lina-san."

Wow, look who's talking.

"Anyway... why are Gorba and his group using this place as a secret base?"

"There must be some reason, but... regardless! If I just blow the whole ruin away with an offensive spell, everything will be solved!"

"Why would you do that!?" Megiga shouted, his pronunciation of the retort suddenly perfect. "Our ambition is to make them stop attacking humans! Blowing it up is not an ambition!"

Ugh, this is so troublesome. But I supposed it couldn't be helped.

"......Fine. I understand. We'll face them head-on. You ready?"

"I am fully prepared."

We looked at each other and nodded. The battle between just the two of us had begun.

Next Episode Preview:

What exactly is the manticore Gorba plotting?

Can Lina and Megiga stop his ambition?

What will become of the abandoned children?

And will Lina lose her temper at the start of the next episode and blow up the entire mountain and ruin with an offensive spell? I'm more worried about that than anything else, folks!

Anyway, next time: *The Eve of Battle (Part 2)*. Wait for it while tearing the tough base off a shiitake mushroom and putting it in your steamed rice!

The Eve of Battle [Part 2]

The sound of the bushes rustling drew an immediate reaction from the minotaur.

"Who’s there!?"

It growled and glared in that direction as if demanding identification. As the creature stepped out from the brush and foliage, the manticore who had revealed himself spoke up in Draconic.

"My name is Megiga. I wish to speak with Gorba."

At those words, the minotaur let out a low grunt.

My plan was simple: Megiga would draw Gorba out, and I would force Gorba into a one-on-one duel with me. Of course, I would make him agree to the condition that if I won, they would call off the battle. I didn't know much about Gorba, but he shouldn't be an opponent I couldn't defeat.

"Wait!"

The voice—barely intelligible but recognizable as Draconic—belonged to one of the goblin sentries. The goblin peered at Megiga, his eyes darting around.

"You're the guy who protected the human!"

He spat the words out with clear hostility. It must have been one of the ones who was there when Megiga and I first met.

"Protected a human?"

At the goblin’s words, the minotaur’s gaze hardened. They were speaking in Draconic as well—it seemed that was their common tongue. *They’re surprisingly studious, aren't they?* The minotaur huffed, brimming with resolve.

"Then I can't let someone like you meet Lord Gorba!"

"This is an important matter."

"I don't care!"

The minotaur cut Megiga’s words off sharply.

"You must listen..... if you don't, you will lose to the humans."

"It is impossible for us to lose to humans!"

The minotaur took Megiga’s warning as an insult; he curled his lip, tossed his horns, and bellowed, "Leave at once! Otherwise, I will kill you!"

"Wait. Let us talk—"

"If you don't leave—"

His short temper exploded with no warning. As Megiga tried to press the issue, the minotaur swung the massive club he held!

"Urgh!"

Megiga groaned and leaped backward. The giant club hissed through the air, barely missing his snout. This wasn't a threat—it was a lethal attack. If Megiga hadn't dodged, he surely would have been blown away. He swiped at his disheveled mane with his right foreleg and tried to speak again.

"Listen—!"

But the minotaur didn't care; he stepped in and launched a second, then a third attack. Megiga barely managed to evade them.

There’s no other choice! Take this!

"Ice Lance!"

I chanted the cold-element spell I’d prepared just in case and unleashed it at the minotaur. Thick ice instantly encased the minotaur, who had been focused solely on Megiga, and stopped him in his tracks.

"H-Human!"

Seeing this, the goblins cried out and bolted straight for the ruins! Megiga turned to pursue them—

"Wait!"

At my command, he froze. By the time I signaled, the goblins were already inside the ruins.

"Lina-san, this is different from when we prepared the plan..." he protested.

"It’s within my expectations. If we just tell them to 'bring out Gorba,' they aren't necessarily going to come out just because we asked nicely. But now, they know we’re here. If we wait, they’ll eventually come swarming out on their own."

"I see. A magnificent ruse." Megiga frowned, though. "What if they don't come swarming out?"

"Then it’s settled." I glanced toward the entrance. "We just go in ourselves."

The cold, damp air held the scent of moss and—faintly—the smell of beasts. We were in a long, mossy corridor that stretched straight into the darkness of the ruins. The faint, dull light in the distance might have been bioluminescent moss or some other source of illumination.

They probably weren't coming out because they were setting a trap to ambush us. Even so, I couldn't just walk away and come back later. If I did, they might raid the nearby town tonight.

In that case, the only option is to break in and smash them! I’ll use their own scheme against them and stir things up from the inside!

There was no sign of anyone near the entrance, but I couldn't let my guard down.

"......My human eyes can't see well in this darkness..... Megiga, can you see anything?"

He narrowed his eyes. "There are split ends all over—"

"—Hold it."

I stopped him before he could start spouting more incomprehensible nonsense. "From here on, let’s speak clearly. I’ll use human speech, and you use Draconic."

"......Strictly speaking, it is not Draconic... but very well. There is a straight passage, and there are branch paths everywhere. I see no one in the areas I can view."

Considering this was a thoroughfare for a large number of Beasts of Darkness and the time that had passed since the goblins fled inside, there shouldn't be any "booby traps." If there were any traps, it would be someone capable of masking their presence lurking in a side path to ambush us as we passed.

I chanted under my breath.

"Light!"

I cast a ball of magical light and tossed it deep into the corridor. If someone was hiding, they would show some sign of agitation.

But... nothing happened.

The light illuminated the walls as it flew far into the distance, eventually sticking to the end of the hall with a *thwack*.

No reaction.

"..............It truly seems there is no one here....." Megiga said.

I replied with a bitter tone. "They aren't setting traps near the entrance; they're trying to lure us deep inside, waiting for our focus and tension to fade... that's probably their strategy."

"In other words, we must keep moving forward."

"That's exactly what it means."

I started walking, and Megiga followed. This was going to be troublesome. If they'd just attacked us mindlessly, I would have had plenty of openings to exploit. Instead, they seemed to be executing a calculated plan. They were probably more wary of Megiga's presence than mine.

I cast light spells occasionally as we delved deeper into the corridor. To the left and right, side passages and the black mouths of ruined rooms gaped open. Even the sound of my own small footsteps on the mossy floor sounded loud to my ears.

Before long, we reached the end of the passage without a single ambush. The path split left and right. The right was blocked by soil and moss, seemingly from a cave-in long ago. The left led to a set of stairs heading down. That was likely the heart of the ruins.

"Well, I don't feel like taking the stairs honestly."

"Do you have a strategy?"

"We're going down from a different spot."

I began my incantation. *It feels like a trap—a massive 'welcome party' waiting at the bottom of those stairs.*

"Fireball!"

I tossed the orb of light down the stairs, retreated along the corridor, and hurriedly chanted the next spell. The fireball struck the bottom of the stairs, exploding with a roar and scattering flames.

That was the signal. I unleashed the next completed spell into the floor!

"Vibration Blast!"

With a deafening crash, the floor beneath my feet shattered, revealing the darkness below! I didn't hesitate—I leaped!

Crash!

I landed on the floor one level down, looked around, and froze.

"......There is no one here....."

"......Yeah..... I see that....."

I had intended to strike the ambush party waiting at the bottom of the stairs, then break through the floor to attack them from behind and sow chaos. It was a spacious, hall-like area lit by torches mounted on the walls. It was strange that there was lighting, but these were mixed units of Beasts of Darkness; some probably couldn't see in the dark.

However, contrary to my calculations, no one was there—not at the foot of the stairs, nor anywhere in the vast hall.

The sound of wings flapped nearby as Megiga descended behind me. I let my shoulders drop and muttered, "Are they trying to lure us even deeper?"

Just then, a number of presences and voices approached from the depths of the shadows. Dozens of Beasts of Darkness emerged from the four corners of the hall.

But Gorba was nowhere to be seen. One ogre among them caught sight of me and cried out in surprise.

"Why is a human here!!"

"Wait a second!" I retorted in their language. "Didn't you hear from the goblin sentries!?"

They looked at each other. A troll looked at the two goblins standing nearby.

"Did you hear?"

"Not at all."

"I don't know."

Give me a break.....

"Come to think of it, weren't you two supposed to be on sentry duty?"

The goblins looked comically flustered. Realizing that everyone’s eyes were focused on them, one of them confessed:

".....I was afraid I'd be scolded for saying I ran away because of a human, so I kept quiet....."

"TELL THEM, YOU IDIOT!"

The entire group of Beasts of Darkness shouted in unison.

Does that mean..... I've been reading too much into things and staying on high alert for an enemy that wasn't even watching?

".....More importantly!" One of the goblins pointed at Megiga and me, desperate to change the subject. "Defeating the human comes first!"

All eyes turned toward us. Gorba was still missing, but the basic plan was still on! I puffed out my chest and declared in their language:

"I wish to challenge Gorba on behalf of all humanity!"

A split second of silence followed. Then, a roar of laughter erupted from all around me.

"A mere human!?!? Don't make me laugh!"

"Lord Gorba doesn't need to come out for the likes of you!"

"Don't let them leave! Everyone, attack!"

At the ogre's cry, the Beasts of Darkness surged toward us from all sides. I reached for the hilt of the short sword at my waist and began chanting under my breath.

Wahoooo!

With a battle cry, Megiga leaped from my side! He aimed straight for the troll. It was a massive opponent with strength to match its size and a high regenerative capability, but the troll misread the distance. Megiga beat his wings to decelerate just before impact, throwing off the troll's timing.

"Ice Arrow!"

I unleashed over a dozen cold-element arrows, flying just above the ground in every direction. Megiga's claws raked through the arm the troll had swung out in a desperate attempt to swat him. As the troll's shriek echoed, the minotaur and three orcs pushed past it and charged toward me.

The icy arrows struck the feet of the troll, the two orcs, and several other beasts behind them, freezing their feet to the floor and sealing their movements. Without pausing, I chanted my next spell.

"Ice Freeze!"

The cold-element spell I cast from above froze the gathered beasts in an instant. They were still alive, of course, but it was enough to keep them at bay. As they struggled, the beasts that had been pinned by the ice frantically scrambled to put distance between themselves and me.

Alright. It looks like I've seized the pace.

"Megiga, land."

"——Understood."

I landed next to the frozen group and looked around at them. "Some of you were saying Gorba didn't need to appear, weren't you? Do you still think so now?"

They didn't answer.

Wait... could it be that they aren't coming out because they're afraid of us?

Just then, a voice filled with expectation rose from the beasts. Their gazes all turned in the same direction—the way my last attack spell had come from. I looked over, too.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! You lot are still struggling with just one or two intruders!"

...Wait. Don't tell me.

The beasts were buzzing. They began to whisper among themselves, looking toward the newcomer.

"Naga... of the White Serpent?"

The disaster-class sorceress who once claimed to be my rival?!

I clutched my head. Where on earth was I supposed to start pointing out the ridiculousness of this? I ruffled my hair in frustration. Meanwhile, the Beasts of Darkness were looking at the newcomer and whispering, "Is that... a human...?"

"Impossible! Our Deputy Leader can't be a human!"

"That's right, Naga-sama. There's no way that's a human."

"Yeah, yeah. No way."

They all chattered, their assessment of Naga surprisingly aligning with my own. But there was one who disagreed.

"Wait! What are you all saying! Of course I am!"

"Hahaha, enough with the jokes, Naga-sama."

"——No, wait. Knowing Naga-sama, perhaps she is telling such a preposterous lie to execute some sort of scheme."

Ah! That makes perfect sense!

"Understood! Let's just assume it's a lie and go with 'not a human'!"

"Right, right! Not a human!"

"Yes, definitely not a human."

"Wait a second, you idiots!" Naga protested angrily.

I don't think you have the right to complain about how people treat you while wearing that outfit...

I sighed. "......Anyway, Naga....." I asked in human tongue, "I haven't seen you in a while, but why on earth are you being paraded around as their Deputy Leader...?"

Naga turned to me, eyes wide with surprise. "That way of speaking...! Could it be the real Lina!?"

"Yes, yes... anyway, speak in human tongue. So, why did this happen?"

"Hmph! A foolish question, Lina Inverse! I was working a part-time job selling vegetables in town to earn travel money, and one thing led to another!"

What happened? And what about the parts in between? ...No, I didn't want to know. It wouldn't be helpful anyway.

"But Naga, do you know?" I gestured to the beasts around us. "They're planning to start an all-out war against humanity."

"Hmph. Now that you mention it, everyone *was* always joking about that."

"......No..... they seem pretty serious about it from the bottom of their hearts, though....."

Naga stared at me blankly for a moment, then puffed out her chest. "Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! ...Really.....?"

I nodded silently. Beside me, Megiga, who also understood human tongue, nodded as well. Naga remained silent for a while, sweating profusely.

"......What should we do, Lina......?"

Ahhh! That's my line!

"For now, the priority is to stop the fighting. By the way, this manticore, Megiga, is an ally. He's an acquaintance of their leader, Gorba, and he's trying to stop this. But unless Gorba himself comes out..."

If I could just stop this war...

"Come to think of it, why are you using a place this close to a human town as your hideout? There must be a reason, right?"

Naga thought for a moment. "Well, it's convenient because it's spacious."

Is that the only reason?!

Whatever. Even if the info was useless, if Naga was trusted by them, maybe I could convince them through her!

"Right, Naga! Can you tell everyone? Tell them there are signs that demons are about to launch a large-scale invasion, so this is not the time for humans and beasts to be fighting each other!"

Of course, the bit about the demons is a complete lie.

"Eh?? Is that so!?" Naga took it seriously, her face turning pale, and she hurriedly relayed my words to the beasts.

Their reaction?

"Hahaha. That's impossible, Naga-sama. For one thing, how would a human know about a demon's plan?"

"That's right. They're just making things up because they're afraid to fight us."

Tsk... they saw through it instantly.

After being told off, Naga smoothed her hair. "Hmph... I suppose you're right..." She turned to me and pointed a finger. "How dare you try to trick me, Lina Inverse! However! With the wisdom of Naga of the White Serpent, seeing through such a lie is child's play! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"Hold it right there!"

I wanted to point out that she *had* been tricked, but Naga was already riding the momentum. The beasts started chanting her name, and she was basking in it.

This is bad.

But before I could act, her laughter echoed through the hall.

"Hmph! If you expect this much from me, I have no choice! I shall show you the true power of Naga of the White Serpent! Dealing with opponents of this level is easy enough to do with one hand tied behind my back!"

She pointed at me again. *She's gotten carried away and lost sight of herself again, that idiot.*

"......Umm..... Lina-san..... what is that person.....?" Megiga asked, looking suspicious.

"......She’s just that kind of creature....." I muttered weakly.

"No more talk! Let’s go, Lina!"

She began chanting a spell. *Is there really no choice?*

Just as I clenched my teeth, a high-pitched voice rang out, stopping both me and Naga in our tracks.

"——S T O P!"

All eyes turned toward the torchlight at the edge of the hall. There stood an old man's face on a lion's body, with bat wings on his back. Though I couldn't see it from this angle, he definitely had a scorpion tail.

"Lord Gorba!" "It's Lord Gorba!"

With the voices of the Beasts of Darkness at his back, Gorba stared straight at us and began to walk toward us, his gait heavy and deliberate.

"Wait a second, Megiga! Who is this woman? She’s not a human is she?! I knew you had a soft spot for humans, but to go this far and get involved with a human woman—it’s pathetic! Absolutely pathetic! Kyaaaa!"

She shrieked hysterically and stomped her feet in a fit of rage. *...This is not the image I had in my head...*

Megiga panicked at her outburst. "W-wait a minute, Gorba! It’s not like that between me and this human..."

"Oh, sure! You always have an excuse, don't you? That’s it! I’ve had enough! I’m tired of it! Fine, do what you want! You’d rather be with a human than another manticore, wouldn't you?"

"I’m begging you, Gorba! Just listen to me!"

"Um... sorry to interrupt your heated moment, but..." I muttered, feeling half-bewildered. "Is Gorba... a girl?"

It occurred to me that I hadn't actually asked about the gender of the opponent.

"Of course she is! It’s obvious from the name!" Megiga snapped back, clearly annoyed by my question.

No, it really wasn't. The Sorcerers' Guild hadn't exactly taught us the intricacies of manticore naming conventions.

But if that was the case... I turned to face Gorba. "Hey, Gorba... by any chance... are you acting out because Megiga is so interested in humans, so you got jealous and decided to do something about them...?"

"——Eh.....?"

Gorba stopped mid-rant, muttering something under her breath while using her scorpion tail to scratch a character into the dirt. (*I hit the nail on the head, didn't I? Good grief…)*

"——So that was it..... heh. You’re a fool, Gorba."

Megiga stepped toward her gently and placed his foreleg over hers.

"If anything were to happen to you, I would be heartbroken. That’s why... I want you to stop this. My interest in humans is nothing more than simple curiosity. You are the one I love most, Gorba."

My pointed remark had made Gorba’s elderly face flush bright red. She looked away, fidgeting with her bat wings. "W-well... I just... you know... I was worried about you, Megiga... since we’ve been friends for so long..."

"Eh?"

"I-I don't know what to say when you just suddenly drop that on me...♡"

"It’s not sudden. I’ve felt that way for a long time."

"But... I’m... I have so many crow’s feet..."

Well, she is a manticore, so that's to be expected.

"What are you talking about? That's part of your charm. But if a war with humans were to start—"

"......That's true..... if something happened to Megiga....."

Megiga looked her straight in the eyes. "I would do anything for you."

"......Oh my..... I don't mind stopping, but I'm not sure what everyone else will say..."

"....."

"....."

"That's enough of that," Naga said, her voice exhausted.

When I looked around, I realized the Beasts of Darkness, who had been swarming the hall just moments ago, had vanished without a trace. The all-out war between humans and beasts had been averted.

Naga and I left Megiga and Gorba to their nauseating display of affection and headed to a nearby town, where I poured all my frustration into stress-eating.

Wait... in the middle of all that drama, I completely forgot... I think I left the children who guided us stranded in the mountains...

"Sorry, Naga! I've got business to take care of!" I shouted, abandoning my meal and the bill as I kicked my chair back and bolted toward the mountains.

I have to go back!

(Eve of Battle : End)

Return of the old men

The shop door flew open with a bang.
Six people stumbled in, their footsteps heavy and irregular. A family? Two parents and a young boy, and another...

It didn't have the atmosphere of a friendly family vacation. Every one of them had eyes filled with terror. One of the fathers scanned the room with wild, bloodshot eyes, muttering "It’s okay now, it’s okay now" to himself, as if trying to convince himself rather than his family.

"Hey, Lina," Naga whispered from across the table, her fork frozen mid-air as she pierced a piece of fried whitefish.

She was in her usual getup: long black hair, black cloak, skull necklace, spiked shoulder guards, and a costume with an unnecessarily high exposure rate. She was a non-human oddity, but I had recently discovered one redeeming quality about her: the "Automatic En-gacho Device.[1]" Whenever she entered a crowded shop, the other customers would immediately get up and leave!

Perhaps the shop was empty not just because it was past lunch hour, but because of her presence.

Naga glanced at the six people frozen in the doorway. "Don't those kids look familiar?"

I looked at the family again. The kids were about five. One had black hair, the other brown hair with a reddish tint. They were clinging to their respective mothers, shivering.

Now that she mentions it... have I seen them somewhere?

"——What’s wrong with you folks?" an elderly man near the entrance asked, clearly concerned.

The six of them jolted in unison.

"Nothing, nothing at all!" one of the mothers shrieked.

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[1] In Japan **En-gacho** is a traditional childhood ritual used to ward off "filth" or bad luck, similar to "cooties" or a "jinx". When someone touches something gross, they make a circle with their index fingers and thumbs. They are considered "contaminated" until a friend performs a cutting motion (a karate chop) through the circle while saying **"Kitta!"** (It's cut!).

The man, stunned by her intensity, shut his mouth and stepped back. It was clearly a subject they didn't want touched.

"Well, dear, I'm thirsty. Think I'll have some juice. How about you, Kayle? Want something to drink?" one of the fathers asked, trying to change the subject.

"They're Kayle and Milton's grandchildren!" Naga blurted out.

Before I could react, the two children burst into tears.

About a month ago, I had met Milton, the chairman of the Sorcerers' Guild in a town called Montere. He was having a feud with Kayle, the chairman of the guild in the neighboring town of Louise, over their grandchildren, and they had decided to settle the score through a competition. I had helped Milton, and Naga had helped Kayle. It had ended in a draw.

If I remembered correctly, their grandchildren's names were... Michael and Lacock.

Thinking about it, Naga and I *had* seen them briefly near the end of the competition. That must be why they looked familiar. But why were they here? These two towns and this village were geographically isolated by jagged mountain ranges and valleys. If there was a path, it certainly wouldn't be suitable for a family picnic.

"......Wait a minute.....!" one of the fathers gasped, looking at us. "Do you know those old geezers!?!?"

But before we could answer, the floorboards erupted.

"We have arrived!"

"To retrieve our beloved grandchildren's smiles!"

"Milton!"

"Kayle!"

With a deafening crash, debris rained down as something tore through the ceiling! Through the dust, two massive shadows flickered.

"We hear it..." the voices echoed, singing in unison. "We hear the sound of tears. The sound of our beloved grandchildren's tears. To dry those tears...!"

The dust cleared, and there they were—Milton and Kayle, posing dramatically.

But what on earth happened to them?! Their faces were the same, but from the neck down, they were bulging with massive, ogre-like muscles that strained against their robes until they were fit to burst. It wasn't a costume; it was their own bodies.

The six family members gasped. Even the crying children were struck speechless.

...I see... so that's why they were running away in terror...

The two muscular geezers peered down at us with a familiar look. "Oh, why if it isn't Lina-san."

Naga and I shrunk back as they beamed at us.

"And Naga-san, too. What a coincidence! We never properly thanked you for your help last time."

"It's good to see you're doing well."

"U-uh... thanks to you as well. Yes."

I looked up at them, cowering slightly. "You two certainly seem... even more energetic than before... or rather... just, how do I put this... what happened to your bodies...?"

"We trained," they answered in perfect unison.

Wow. Despite the sheer absurdity of the situation, they dismissed it with a single phrase, leaving me and Naga to harmonize in our bewilderment.

"After the competition where Lina-san and her friends helped us..."

"For a while, our grandchildren kept their distance from us..."

Milton Muscle and Kayle Muscle—the geezers formerly known as Milton and Kayle—responded in turn, almost as if they had rehearsed it.

"And so, we pondered. Just where had we gone wrong?"

"The answer was found immediately! Namely! That relying on the strength of others had been our mistake!"

They overlapped their voices once more to declare, "Therefore, we have trained our own physical bodies to perfection!"

...No. Well. Just because you think about something doesn't mean you'll find the right answer. But still. Even so, I'm not sure about making a mistake this colossal.

"And so," one said.

"Hearing the cries of our grandchildren, who disappeared with the rest of the family a few days ago, we came to find them," the other finished.

The reason the family disappeared seemed painfully obvious to me, but the geezers clearly had no self-awareness. They turned their heads toward their families with a sharp *whoosh!*

"Now, Michael!"

"Lacock!"

"Tell us! Just what are you so afraid of that you're crying!?"

The children gasped for air, their small bodies trembling. Summoning every ounce of courage they had, they both timidly raised their right hands. They pointed directly at their respective grandfathers.

...Well. Obviously.

The Muscle Geezers shivered, but then they turned around to see what their grandsons were pointing at. As it happened, Lina and Naga were standing right in their line of sight!

"......I see. So that's how it is."

"I let my guard down because I thought they were acquaintances..."

The geezers' eyes began to burn with intensity.

"Wait a minute—!"

"Lina, those two are looking at us!"

Of course, there was no way our words would reach the ears of grandfathers blinded by their love for their grandsons.

"NO MORE TALK!"

The geezers barked, and their bodies blurred! Naga and I moved on pure instinct, dodging to the side just as the roar of wind and the presence of beasts rushed past us. In that instant, Naga and I were perfectly in sync. As we leaped toward the doorway, we chanted our spells at maximum speed!

The geezers, having missed us, crashed into the counter, smashing it to pieces. As they casually stood up and turned around, the moment they faced us, we unleashed our spells simultaneously!

"Van Rail! (Ice Cave Vines!)"

We used the exact same spell! Starting from the casters' hands, freezing vines crawled across the walls and floor, turning everything they touched into pillars of ice. The two spells collided, causing mutual interference and transforming into a lashing ice dragon that swallowed the two geezers whole!

Clang!

The air shrieked, and thick, hardened ice completely encased the Muscle Geezers.

Phew! Capture successful!

Naga and I exchanged a wink.

"Don't get comfortable just yet!"

We turned at the voice to find one of the fathers staring at us, pale-faced but resolute.

"Please... keep them restrained. Father and the others."

"It seems we need to talk, but we don't have much time," the father said. "Look at the ice."

The mutual interference of our spells seemed to have increased the potency of the magic; the ice was thick enough to hold even a dragon, let alone an ogre. Inside that cloudy, white prison, the Muscle Geezers were... motionless. Or so it seemed.

A chill ran down my spine. I involuntarily took a step back.

"....."

"What is it? Lina?" Naga asked.

I couldn't tear my eyes away from the ice. "Naga... the ice... it’s cloudy in the middle, right?"

"So what of it?"

"Look closely. Those... are cracks."

Naga’s face turned pale, and she took a step back just like I did. She was right. The geezers, who seemed to be completely bound, were still conscious and pouring their strength into shattering the prison from within. And that strength was manifesting as countless tiny cracks, damaging their icy cell.

"It is only a matter of time before they break through."

The voice from behind us rang out like a sentence from purgatory. We all agreed without hesitation that we should leave the area immediately and discuss things on the road.

We hid ourselves in the mountains for the time being. After we explained our connection to the dads, they nodded in understanding. To avoid confusion, we decided to call the parents "Michael-papa," "Michael-mama," and so on, which was much easier than dealing with their real names.

In the green shade of the woods, we continued our conversation.

"For a while after that competition, Grandpa and Milton-san seemed to be depressed together," Lacock-mama explained, using gestures to emphasize her point. She was standing—perhaps she didn't want to dirty her clothes—while Lacock-kun clung to her waist in terror.

"But one day, they started talking about 'training the body.' I told them it was impossible and to stop..."

She continued, "As you'd expect, they pushed themselves too hard, hurt their backs and knees, and would be bedridden for days. They repeated this over and over. But... let's see, how many days ago was it?"

"It was five days ago. The same day our neighbor, Michelle, gave birth to a boy," Michael-mama added, stroking Michael's hair as she sat on a fallen tree. "They smiled and said they found a great way to train, and then they went out... Two days later, they came back in those bodies."

"They insisted that strength is everything and that communication with your grandchildren is secondary," Michael-papa added, pacing around nervously. "They wouldn't listen to a word... they didn't even notice the children were terrified..."

"We even tried to freeze them with spells as a joke," Lacock-mama whispered. "But the look they gave me... it wasn't a joke at all. I was so scared that time..."

You did what? You crazy middle-aged woman.

"We thought maybe Kayle-san or someone in his family knew something, so we reached out, and it turned out the same thing was happening over there..."

Lacock-papa, who had been leaning against a tree, remained silent.

"......Hmm....." I scratched my head after hearing the story. "There's no way they could've gotten like that in just two days of training. Something must have happened in between..."

Honestly, Naga and I are just getting dragged into this. Part of me wants to just run away right now.

"Hmph. I certainly don't want to get involved in this mess," Naga added with a weary, bitter smile.

"Ummmmm!"

Seeing that we might abandon them, Michael-papa panicked and raised his voice. "I know this is a selfish request, but could you please lend us your strength? I know it's a lot to ask, but..."

One enticing, helpless look. Naga and I froze for a second.

"But even if we 'lend our strength,' we can't exactly blast those enhanced geezers into smithereens with attack spells, can we? And there's no point in us running away with you forever..."

"Make Grandpa go back to normal!" Michael-kun shouted. "Grandpa is scary now, but he used to be kind!"

"......I want Grandpa to go back to normal, too....." Lacock-kun whispered tearfully.

This isn't an atmosphere where I can just say no. I thought for a moment.

"I can't promise anything, but... first, we need to find the cause of why they turned into that."

"Do you have any idea what it might be?"

"Maybe they trained *too* hard?"

"Maybe they're wearing really realistic muscle suits?"

"Maybe a strange creature is just pretending to be our fathers."

As the mothers chimed in with various theories, Lacock-papa muttered, "They probably used magic to enhance themselves."

There was a beat.

"THAT'S IT!" the other parents shouted, praising Lacock-papa. He remained silent, looking disgruntled.

Look, I know it's obvious that if your Chairman suddenly gets buffed, you'd think of magic enhancement first... but did none of you other parents notice?

"......That's why I asked if you knew any mages who specialize in that kind of research..."

"If that’s the case," Lacock-mama suggested, "my father met with a female mage wearing a monocle right before he changed. I happened to see them talking in town when I went shopping, but I thought it was just guild business... maybe..."

Naga and I exchanged a silent glance. We both recalled that the woman conducting the competition between the two geezers had been wearing a monocle.

"In that case, we need to return to the town where the Guild is. We’ll have to cross the mountains... but since you guys did it with a whole family, you must have someone who can use levitation or similar spells, right?"

The two dads nodded.

We visited the town of Louise again. It was a perfectly ordinary town. There was a Sorcerers' Guild, some local historical landmarks, a small guard station, and open-air stalls lining the main street.

Inside a room in the Sorcerers' Guild, a woman with a monocle—Rita Antulood—spoke in an unenthusiastic tone.

"Yes, I did give them that medicine."

She was in her late twenties, beautiful but with a lackluster attitude. Unlike the day of the competition, she was dressed in a drab black robe used for experiments. The parents were standing there, practically cornering her, but she just slumped in her chair, looking bored.

"WHY ON EARTH WOULD YOU DO THAT!?" Michael-papa screamed.

"Well... they asked me to let them use it if I had something that could make a human body sturdier," she replied nonchalantly. "I’m conducting research on human physiological functions, and I’ve been running experiments on human muscles. So, one day, the Chairmen asked me, 'You study human bodies—do you have anything that makes them sturdy quickly?' I just handed them my prototype: 'Meki-Meki Macho Juice.' That’s all."

What a disgusting name.

"S-so you *did* turn our fathers into that!"

"Ah, don't get me wrong," she brushed off Michael-papa’s intensity as if it were a light breeze. "Are you thinking they’re running amok because of side effects? The medicine has no side effects. The only drawback is that it makes them a little *too* muscular. They’re just enjoying their newfound power and running wild on their own. In short, it’s entirely their fault. If you want to blame someone, go complain to them."

...Ugh.

"If that’s the case, can’t you make a medicine with the opposite effect to turn them back?" I asked.

She pondered for a moment, staring into space. "Hmm. In principle, it might be possible."

"ARE YOU SERIOUS!?"

"PLEASE, WE BEG YOU!"

She ignored their frantic begging. "It will take about two days. And I will be charging you for the manufacturing costs... but..."

"But?" Michael-papa asked anxiously.

"Even if they go back to normal, I suspect those two will just do something similar again eventually. I gave them that medicine hoping they’d learn their lesson, but instead, they’ve just gotten addicted to it. You really need to have a serious family talk about this."

"......We’ll try our best....."

After being asked, Michael began to cry out loud,

"Gloo! Gloo! Gland-fatha's coming!"

...Grandfather is... coming!!

Everyone looked at each other, pale-faced.

One could say it was just a child's delusion. Certainly, a child who had been cooped up in his room shouldn't have known something like that.

I stopped the mumbling.

The whole family looked uneasy.

At any rate, the manufacturing of the medicine began to return Grandpa to his original state.

I felt as though I had heard a faint scream in the wind blowing across the twilight. When I looked upwind, it was still a peaceful twilight streetscape. But.

"I heard something, didn't I?"

For some reason, the blood-colored sunset made my heart uneasy.

Naga's murmured words told me that what I had just heard wasn't my imagination. We both listened to the wind for a while.

From the terrace of the Council President's office on the fifth floor of the Mage Association, one could overlook the town of Louise. Today was our second day visiting this place.

The bursting sound of a child's cry came from behind.

My anxiety might have just been evoked by the sunset, and the faint scream I heard on the wind might have been someone's voice raised because a cockroach flew into their face.

Naga and I turned on our heels and ran toward the sound!

"A premonition?"

If I believed Rita's words, it was about time the medicine was finished, but...

I had a really bad feeling about this.

"What's wrong here, Lina? You aren't doing something out of character, like being sentimental watching the sunset, are you?"

The voice I heard from behind was Naga's—I didn't even need to turn around to confirm it.

I kept looking at the scenery and said,

"I just... have a bad feeling about this..."

I nodded slightly and added,

"..... And my premonitions at times like this tend to be annoyingly accurate..."

It was a foolish thing to be swayed by a small premonition, but it was also foolish to dismiss all premonitions as mere products of one's imagination.

The room at the end of the hallway. That room, which had been a storage room until two days ago, now held six people from two families hiding inside.

When I opened the door, Michael and Lacock were crying loudly amidst the bewildered parents.

"They suddenly started crying."

Michael's father, who noticed us, said.

"——What's wrong, Michael?"

Naga and I looked at each other, nodded, and ran back to the original room!

I dove in and pulled the string hanging from the ceiling.

Chirichirichirichiri... Chiring!

The sound of the alarm, made by repurposing a call bell, echoed from the basement to the top floor of the association building. I opened the lid of the speaking tube, which utilized a rain gutter by the window, and shouted.

"Grandfathe—"

Warning. Warning.

Alarm activated! Grandfather alarm activated!

Alert level yellow! All staff, do your best to detect the target!"

At the declaration, the Mage Association building suddenly became busy!

We had anticipated that the enhanced Grandpas would eventually come to this land in search of their grandchildren.

So, we had worked together to turn this Mage Association building into a defensive base against the Grandpas, until Rita's medicine was completed!

It was ironic that the Council President's office, which was supposed to welcome the Council President herself, had become the command center for attacking them.

Some of the staff who had been waiting on the first floor scattered throughout the town to search for the target's appearance. We decided that if they found them, they would send a signal.

Of course, it would have been better if it had just been my imagination... but...

Naga and I looked down at the town of Louise from the window. There were some blind spots from here, but the other staff were supposed to monitor those from different rooms and contact us via speaking tube if anything happened.

Waiting was a long process. I wondered how long we had been watching outside like that. Judging by the tilt of the sun, it shouldn't have been that long, but——

A small light was born on the other side of the town.

The magical light was released into the upper sky.

It was a signal from the staff who had gone out to investigate. It meant, *Target Sighted.*

I dove to the nearby speaking tube and shouted!

"Signal confirmed from the scouts! Transitioning from alert level yellow to red! All units, move to interception positions! Close the passage doors upon contact! Focus entirely on stalling them!"

"Lina!"

At Naga's voice, which was close to a scream, I looked outside the window———

While I was wide-eyed, another light appeared closer. And another one closer still. Lights were released one after another.

It was like a path of light extending toward us. They were heading straight for us at an inhuman speed!

"This is——a declaration of war!"

A new light was born in the twilight town.

A magical light that appeared even closer than the previous one.

“Ho-ho-ho. Lina, what kind of game are you playing?”

It was Grandpa's voice that returned.

My own voice, which I let out without thinking, was trembling slightly.

The number of staff we had sent out to investigate was sufficient, but it was by no means large. It was probably fewer than the number of lights shining in the town now.

I called out in a suppressed voice. I didn't expect an answer, but—

“But this isn't even exercise. Young people these days are pathetic.”

I hadn't had high expectations, but that light—except for the very first one—wasn't something released by our staff.

They had realized that those were signals, and the Grandpas were releasing them everywhere they went! The path of light was rapidly approaching the building——

I spoke into the speaking tube, my voice fearful.

"First floor! They're coming!"

“This is the first-floor entrance! Our defenses are perfect—there's no way—!”

The voice that came back from the speaking tube was suddenly cut off, and in its place, a crushing sound rang out!

“I... Impossible! Is that really Grandpa!?!? Gwaaaaah!”

A scream—and silence. Something cold clung to my spine.

I still tried to pull myself together and asked,

“.....First floor. Respond.”

The voice of Kerbie-chan followed.

“.....Second-floor west staircase.....!”

What I heard from the speaking tube soon after was the voice of a terrified man.

“The door... the door is being knocked on!”

At the report, I bit my back teeth.

Even I... I hadn't expected them to not even serve as a delay...

I shouted into the speaking tube.

"The first floor has been breached! Each floor, transition from alert level red to over-level! The use of attack spells, limited to ice types, is permitted!"

“Ho. Interesting.”

“Then, I’ll give it a try.”

The two's voices ended there.

They were intoxicated by the power they had obtained and were playing with us. Like beasts tormenting their prey.

The building had five floors in total. If the Grandpas got serious, I didn't want to imagine how long it would last!

"It's finished!! Finally!"

Rita let out a smug laugh, with dark circles under her eyes, having probably pulled an all-nighter. She held the beaker in her right hand high.

"I did it! Though it's my own work, is it a miracle of God or the work of the devil! It will melt away human muscles and bones! Its name is Grandpa Destroyer!"

"Giving it such a name..."

I muttered,

"I mean, please don't destroy them!"

Michael retorted with teary eyes.

"They'll obviously die, right!?"

Rita looked at them with a listless gaze,

"This is strictly a concentrate. If you pour it into a pool or something, the muscles and bones will gradually shrink according to the concentration, so pull them out at an appropriate time and wash them with water. Even if you make a mistake and sprinkle the concentrate on them, they will really die."

"So, where is that pool-like place?"

To Michael's mother's question, Rita looked troubled,

"Even if you ask me to prepare that much..."

"Speaking of water! It’s not a pool, but there’s a well right nearby!"

Lacock's mother said, her face brightening.

"If we dissolve the medicine in there and lure the two of them into it somehow!"

"The well is connected to the groundwater. The medicine will dissolve into all the well water in the area and make it undrinkable."

Lacock's mother snapped at being told that by someone.

"What! What are you two arguing about!?"

“Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! If you don't have a pool, you can just make one!”

The stupid laughter of Naga, who was usually confused anyway, echoed in the chaotic space!

"That's it, Naga! Naga, make a pool! I'll drive the two of them into it!"

"Huh! Understood, Lina!"

Naga answered, whether she really understood or was just saying it on impulse.

I turned to everyone else and said,

"So, I'm borrowing the medicine and the children!"

"Wait...!"

Lacock's mother leaned forward to protest at the statement about borrowing the children, but Lacock's father stopped her and asked the children.

"If you help the big sister, it seems the big sister will return the Grandpas to normal. What do you think? Shall we do it?"

"Yeah!"

The children nodded in unison without hesitation—and so, the decision was made.

I hugged the two children.

“Earth Sealing World!”

Naga chanted the spell alone, holding someone.

Seeing that appear behind her, I understood the situation.

And the four of us flew into the air!

A dense hostility and pressure.

The Grandpas who had reached the top floor recognized Naga and me as enemies.

I didn't even need to turn around to know the opponent's next move. They would jump out of the window, chant a levitation spell, kill the speed of their fall, land, and start running on the ground to chase us. Because that was the only way they could catch up to us.

We were currently using a high-speed flight technique that wrapped a wind barrier around us. It was a difficult technique where the control became harder as the sum of weight and altitude increased, proportional to the practitioner's ability. I didn't think the Grandpas could handle this.

They could probably use levitation at least, but the movement speed was too different.

However, even we couldn't maintain that speed for long while holding two children. It was a matter of time before we were caught, but——

"Well, it's not that we're scared. You should know that if we suddenly chase you, your grandchildren will be scared."

Just then.

"Don't you understand that your grandchildren are scared of you!?"

But the Grandpas didn't even show a hint of agitation.

"If we spend some time together, even Lacock will realize that being with me is the happiest thing."

"Just become strong, you'll understand."

One after another, selfish, stalker-like lines. The misunderstanding was extreme.

The Grandpas had indeed gained power. But just because they gained more power than before, it didn't necessarily mean they would be loved more by anyone.

However, if they could have understood by being told, someone would have persuaded them and changed their hearts long ago. I knew that.

The reason I was talking like this was to stall for time and stop the opponent's movement!

And then.

“Sea King Destruction Slash!”

Naga's echoed voice rang out!

At that moment, a huge white snake soared from the nearby well into the twilight sky!

It was the technique that Naga, who had entered the well, had unleashed.

It was a technique that turned water into blades, or perhaps spears, to deal a fatal blow! It couldn't be used without a large amount of water, but the well water was connected to an infinite underground vein!

The water pillar that blew up, just like a huge snake, bent in the air, changed its trajectory, and lunged toward the Grandpas!

“Naive!”

The Grandpas barked and dodged. The water spear pierced the ground and returned to just water.

"It seems the power is great, though!"

At Milton Grandpa's mockery—

“Sea King Destruction Slash!”

Naga's second shot!

"It didn't even scratch me!"

Simultaneously with Kayle Grandpa's provocation, the third shot landed a little away from me.

"Is this supposed to be a trap!?"

Milton Grandpa laughed in composure.

They seemed to be mistaking this for an attack. Just as I had intended.

Unfortunately, that was not the case. What I had just done was not an attack, but manual labor.

The spell hit exactly as intended—right into the ground. The water spears had pierced deep into the earth, and within those holes, they simply returned to being ordinary water. The pool was now complete!

All that remained was to get the Grandpas to enter it, but, of course, they wouldn't just walk in if I asked them nicely. So, I did what I had to do: I made it so they had no choice but to enter!

I grabbed the children on either side of me by their collars and tossed them unceremoniously into the pool in front of us. I hadn't told them anything beforehand, and they struggled in surprise.

"UWAAAAAAHHHH!"

"Spirit Spell!"

The Grandpas rushed over in a panic. As they dove into the pool with a *splash*—I placed my hands on the edge of the pool and unleashed the spell I had been chanting under my breath.

It was a technique to create stone dolls. The ground at the edge of the pool rapidly shifted shape, rising up as a large humanoid figure. It scooped up the children in its hands.

Because the stone walls had been hollowed out and shifted to become the golem, the water level dropped. Before the Grandpas could understand the situation or make a move, I commanded the golem to pull the two of them out.

By that time, the Grandpas had already reverted to their feeble, elderly selves.

Thus ended the incident that would later be recorded in the Mage Association guilds of two towns as the "Geezer Muscle-fication Incident."

...Well, afterward, I was scolded by the family members for "throwing children into a pool, strategy or not," but in the end, I received a proper reward, so it was mostly fine.

Even though the Grandpas were back to normal, it didn't mean they were any less obsessed with their grandchildren, nor did it mean Rita would stop researching her bizarre potions. Perhaps an incident like this might happen again as soon as tomorrow.

Perhaps it was a problem humanity would be forced to carry forever.

.....Sorry. Even I think that was a bit much.

(The End)

Afterword

Author: And so, I present to you *Slayers Special* volume 23, "Break of Destiny"!

As I write this afterword, it’s the height of summer! These days, I’m thoroughly enjoying the season to the fullest!

L: "Summer, you say? By the time this is on sale, I’m pretty sure it’ll be well into autumn."

Author: "That may be true, but don't worry about the details!"

L: "So, does that mean you’ve been swimming?"

Author: "What are you talking about! When people think of summer, they think of Junji Inagawa’s ghost story live shows, obviously!" *(It’s true... that does feel very 'summery', I suppose...)*

Author: "I went to one!"

L: "You went?"

Author: "Of course! I was there with everyone else, waving around bundles of incense sticks instead of penlights, chanting in a huge chorus, 'Tell us yours too!'"

L: "There’s no such thing as a ghost story concert like that!"

Author: "Hahaha. Well, I admit some parts may differ from reality. But regardless, I enjoyed it to the fullest!"

L: "That doesn't sound like 'enjoying it' to me..."

Author: "Hmm. Everyone says that for some reason. You don’t have to act so tough."

L: "No, I'm just being honest."

Author: "Usually, when people say they're enjoying summer, they mean festivals, mountain retreats, or the beach."

L: "Maybe like a white hand reaching out from the waves to pull in swimmers?"

Author: "I have a feeling... you actually hate summer, don't you, Author?"

Author: "What on earth are you talking about! Summer! It’s the season when more true ghost story books are published than any other time of year!"

L: "So that’s it!"

Author: "That, and going back to my hometown for Obon to feed river fish with goldfish food! And then going on a tour of five different gyoza restaurants without even thinking about it!"

L: "Is that just like... saying you hate hard-boiled eggs but like soft-boiled ones? That sort of thing?"

Author: "Even if it’s not directly related to summer, I’m taking advantage of the excitement to enjoy all sorts of things!"

L: "Is that a kind of selfishness? For example, going to a 'gyoza theme park' for a crawl! And discovering something new there!"

Author: "I think that’s a completely normal reaction."

L: "Discovering something new in gyoza?"

Author: "Yes! I complain that it’s not the same if I don't have a drink, and if a ghost appears, I say, 'I’ve had enough of this!' That’s the attitude I’m talking about!"

L: "...No, that’s not a 'new discovery', that’s just..."

Author: "Wait, wait, what is that clever word-trimming?"

L: "My image of it is: you inherit a seaside mansion from a distant uncle, and then you're chased around by a creature that doesn't really look like a fish—that kind of bittersweet summer memory?"

Author: "No, no. I don’t want a summer where I can hear footsteps behind me while writing an afterword! And it clearly looks like a dead end. Besides, I like ghost stories, but I don’t want to experience any creepy occurrences!"

L: "Geez. So demanding."

Author: "Anyway, setting that aside. Before anyone tries to listen to this story, a mysterious blonde beauty with a copper grater will appear and grate them to pieces."

L: "Wait, that’s before they listen to it!?"

Author: "Hmm. Speaking of ghost stories, I know one too."

L: "Oh?"

Author: "It’s a spin-off of the pattern where 'the person who hears this story will also have the same creepy experience.' If that actually happens, it’s not a ghost story anymore, it’s a genuine supernatural phenomenon."

L: "I see. So it's a 'chain letter' type."

Author: "That’s right. Although the contagiousness of that type of story is scary, the content itself is usually mediocre..."

L: "Well, whatever. So, what kind of story is it?"

Author: "Yes. This is a story that one of my subordinates actually experienced..."

L: "Done~!"

Gishigishigishigishigishigishigishigishigishi!

Author: "Wait! It’s not a supernatural phenomenon, it’s human-made! Wait, didn't you just say earlier..."

Author: "Wow. But to think such a supernatural phenomenon would actually happen... It just goes to show that not everything in this world can be explained by science."

Author: "...Well, some people have a theory that the biggest supernatural phenomenon is the fact that even if the author collapses every time in the afterword, they revive as if nothing happened the next time."

Author: "Maybe it’s like shark teeth, where there are several authors lined up under the floor, and when one collapses, the next one pops up—that kind of system."

Author: "Well, anyway, that part doesn't really matter. Anyway, everyone, see you in the next volume!"

(Afterword ends)